

SHELLEY, CHRIST, AND NARCISSUS

It has long been a commonplace among Shelley's readers that he hated the Christian religion but loved its originator. It has more recently become a critical commonplace that Shelley's life and writings betray a strong element of narcissism, a particularly insidious brand of narcissism which undervalues, appropriates, or altogether eliminates any (feminine) other whom the poet or his protagonist encounters. David Lee Clark's essay introduction to his collection of Shelley's prose, along with his introductions to many of the texts themselves, epitomizes the former stance: that Shelley easily and consistently made a neat distinction between the Christian doctrine, institution, and so-called practitioners on the one hand, and Jesus Christ himself on the other. Clark in fact repeatedly insists on this unproblematic separation between Church and Son as it supposedly existed within Shelley's own mind and writings.¹ Barbara A. Schapiro's chapter on Shelley in her study of "narcissistic patterns in Romantic poetry," *The Romantic Mother*, exemplifies the more recent trend in Shelley criticism: locate and denounce evidence of narcissism in the Shelley canon.²

The charge of narcissism, like that of sexism or racism, is often easy to make and even easier to resist examining—somehow the label seems enough. Yet it is crucial that we understand and not simply identify those undeniably narcissistic tendencies in Shelley's psyche, for, as Shelley himself knew, self-concern, if not self-love per se, continually prevented him from realizing what is arguably his most cherished artistic and personal goal: conceptualizing, representing, and participating in what he calls "consentaneous love" (*QM*, VIII. 108). I believe that the only way to get at the roots of Shelley's complex kinship with Narcissus is to recognize the poet's even more troublesome kinship with Narcissus' polar opposite, Christ, the great exemplar of selfless love who did not escape but in fact provoked and received much of the wrath that Shelley ostensibly reserved for the Christian church.

Shelley's obsession with Christ and his preoccupation with the clash between selfishness and love burst simultaneously onto the pages of his 1810 and 1811 letters to Thomas Hogg, letters that chronicle the most momentous rejection of the poet's life: the loss of his beautiful cousin Harriet Grove, with

whom he was informally engaged.³ Although, as her diary reveals, Harriet was in many ways an ordinary young woman transformed by her cousin's needs and desires into his muse and soul mate—a pattern he would repeat many more times—Shelley's love for her was obviously genuine. Moreover, the circumstances under which the engagement broke off and the fact that Harriet bore a remarkable resemblance to him converted this romantic disappointment into something of far greater impact on Shelley's theories of love and selfhood as well as on his actual relationships.

Neither Shelley's "narcissism" nor his vehement anti-Christianity is the product of a kind of spontaneous generation in the wake of lost love. But the fact that Harriet pulled away from him because of his alarming "speculations" seems both to have heightened his susceptibility to the temptations of Self and to have inflamed his budding skepticism about orthodox Christianity.⁴ To begin with the former issue, the most notorious manifestation of Shelley's self-involvement is his penchant for his own (feminine) "twins," beginning with his look-alike sister Elizabeth and continuing with Harriet Grove and even Beatrice Cenci.⁵ This emotional dynamic might have taken hold during early childhood as a mild form of narcissism, which was then exacerbated by his exile from the maternal and sororal circle when he was sent away to Syon House Academy in 1802. Kenneth Neill Cameron speaks of "a partial rejection of the boy by his mother," which perhaps helped create the poet's "phobia of the withdrawal of love (e.g. in *Alastor*)"—and, I would add, his need to create a series of self-imaging lovers, a pattern evident in the poem that Cameron cites (*Young Shelley* 4). Holmes pursues Cameron's line of thought, locating this "rejection" in the Syon House period: "From a few stray remarks in letters from Oxford, and from passing references by his cousin Tom Medwin and his undergraduate friend T. J. Hogg, we can gather that the feelings between mother and son were exceptionally close and warm up to the time that Shelley went to school. After this Shelley seems to have found his mother increasingly distant and unresponsive, and there are indications that he felt deeply rejected" (*Pursuit* 11).

However, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi finds that the "mother-son alliance" (*Shelley's Goddess* 105) survived the Syon House "banishment," though she recognizes both Percy's sense of maternal "betrayal" in this matter and the deep ambivalences that permeated this intense relationship (101).⁶ Both Christine Gallant's Jungian (and Kleinian) reading of the Mother-archetype in Shelley's work⁷ and Gelpi's psychobiographical account of the Shelleys' actual mother-son bond emphasize maternal power and the fear—as well as the love—it inspires. Shelley's turning back toward the self and his proclivity for what Freud terms "narcissistic object-choice"⁸ may have been the poet's response to the (perceived) withdrawal of his beautiful, vibrant mother, incarnation of the mythic Mother Goddess at the center of Gelpi's illuminat-

ing study. And Shelley's ethereal sisters of the soul, real and imagined, may be less threatening, less forbidden, so to speak, versions of the omnipotent and elusive mother.

To return to the period of the poet's late adolescence, Shelley's incipient tendency to replace his ambivalently loved mother with a sister-twin would receive a powerful catalyst in his adolescent losses of his closest female companions, Harriet and Elizabeth, whom he almost compulsively attempts to recreate in the idealized sister-lovers of his post-1810 writings. (Elizabeth retreated from Percy and his "deistifying" in the spring of 1811, if not earlier.) This mother-sister-cousin constellation crystallized not just within Percy's mind, for Harriet, daughter of Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley's *own* sister, had always been close to her "Aunt Shelley" and became an intimate friend and correspondent of young Elizabeth in the summer of 1809. The second poem in *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* is in fact a chatty and affectionate verse epistle from Elizabeth to her cousin, dated 30 April 1810 (CW, I, 7-9).

While the sources of Shelley's narcissistic tendencies remain somewhat obscure, it is much easier to pinpoint the beginnings of his anti-Christian views. The poet's questioning of Christianity began at least as early as his years at Syon House Academy (1802-1804), where a "choleric divine" and exposure to scientific thought "alienated him further from religious views" that were already fragile due to the superficial orthodoxy observed at Field Place, the Shelley home (Cameron, *Young Shelley*, 71). Percy's personal vendetta against Christ himself, though, seemed to begin only when his and Harriet's parents started interfering with the cousins' relationship in September 1809,⁹ and it gained momentum after Harriet showed some of Shelley's impious letters to her father in the fall of 1810. Harriet, writes her brother Charles, "became uneasy at the tone of his letters on speculative subjects, at first consulting my mother, and subsequently my father also on the subject. This led at last . . . to the dissolution of an engagement between Bysshe and my sister, which had previously been permitted, both by his father and mine" (Hogg, II, 155). Thus such poems as "To Death" (1810) and particularly *The Wandering Jew* (1810), though written before the final break with Harriet early in 1811,¹⁰ evince an increasing fascination with and hostility toward the person of Christ, whom Shelley will energetically curse for tearing "the dearest the tenderest of [his] ties" (L, I, 35: 3 January 1811).

It is in his remarkable, explosive series of letters written to his best friend, Hogg, between December 1810 and the summer of 1811, when Shelley eloped with Harriet Westbrook, that we can witness Shelley reviling Christ in one breath and taking up his cross in the next (and I would like that final pronoun to remain ambiguous). The venom with which the young poet lashes out at the "adversary" who, in Percy's mind, robbed him first of Harriet and then of Elizabeth, betrays his own intense emotional investment in and iden-

tification with this most despised and most exalted of men, the archetype of that selfless love that Percy himself so desperately wanted to embody (*L*, I, 29: 20 December 1810).¹¹ As early as his boyhood "conversion" to the "Spirit of BEAUTY," an epiphanic experience that both the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and the dedication to *Laon and Cythna* commemorate, Shelley was actively cultivating his messianic impulses ("Hymn," l. 13). Declaring war against the world's "dark slavery," he apparently saw himself even then in overtly Christlike terms, as a "meek and bold" victim who is also a savior ("Hymn," l. 70; *CW*, I, 252: *LC*, Dedication, l. 36).¹²

More than just a role model, a Bloomian precursor, or a surrogate for his "Christian" father, Jesus comes closest for Shelley to what the twentieth-century psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut would designate a "selfobject" or what the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would call a "paradigm." Although, as Jane Rubin has pointed out, Kohut's "selfobject" and Kierkegaard's "paradigm" differ in some important ways¹³—as do their notions of identity—both terms imply a person with whom the self psychically merges as it *becomes* that self.¹⁴ For Kierkegaard, Christ is "the paradigm," he who "help[s] every man to become himself" when he "draw[s] all unto [Him]self" (111, 159).¹⁵ For Kohut,¹⁶ Christ embodies one version of the "idealized" selfobject of whose "omnipotence" the self can partake as it gratifies and, in turn, modifies "the grandiose self," the potential source of two quite different offspring: realistic self-esteem and excessive self-involvement, both of which became central concerns for Shelley during the Harriet Grove crisis.¹⁷

According to Kohut, the latter may emerge when the grandiose self is repressed or somehow denied access to the idealized selfobject. In effect, Shelley cut *himself* off from his own omnipotent selfobject, Christ. The Kohutian narrative would suggest that the poet thus "suppress[ed] the aspirations of the grandiose self"¹⁸ which then turned inward and developed into immoderate narcissism. Actually, "narcissism" is a rather misleading term, especially when we consider Shelley's evident lack of authentic self-love or "self-devotion."¹⁹ And Shelley certainly does not exude the kind of "bloated self-esteem" that, as Peter Gay points out, has become loosely synonymous with this word (340).

Freud's concept of "secondary narcissism" perhaps best approximates Shelley's own psychological pattern *and* the kind of egocentrism that he condemned under the heading "principle of Self." To begin with, Freud posited a "primary narcissism," the "original libidinal cathexis of the ego" that defines the infant's state of fusion with the world, a kind of innocent egotism that precedes true object relations ("On Narcissism: An Introduction," *SE*, XIV, 75). We might think of Freud's second type as "fallen" narcissism, a retreat back into the self after the world of objects has been recognized and

entered: "the narcissism which arises through the drawing in of object-cathexes [is] a secondary one, superimposed upon a primary narcissism" ("On Narcissism," *SE*, XIV, 75).²⁰ Freud's image of "the drawing in" of energy from the world, from others, provides a nice contrast with Shelley's own definition of Love in the *Defence* as "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (487). For both Freud and Shelley, the coiling back into the self that characterizes (secondary) narcissism signals a lost connection with an "object-world" that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes bruising.

Kohut's model of a developing self-in-relation illuminates how a series of narcissistic injuries, which in Shelley's mind revolved around a complex configuration of loved ones (his mother, his favorite sister, his cousin, and Christ), culminated at a critical time in Shelley's emotional and intellectual development.²¹ Freud and Kohut both trace what the latter calls "narcissistic vulnerability" to early childhood trauma, with Freud emphasizing the oedipal period and Kohut the preoedipal stage of the inchoate self.²² According to Kohut, it is the (preoedipal) infant's harmonious interaction with "archaic selfobjects" (the parents themselves) that determines later selfobject relations—and that in effect *creates* the child's self, his or her sense of stability and cohesion. "Empathic failures" on the part of the parent(s)—or, more neutrally, a lack of "empathic resonance" between parent and child—can prevent such self-development and make the child particularly susceptible to severe narcissistic wounds in later life. Kohut's comments in his seminal essay "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage" illuminate the psychological patterns that Shelley himself exemplifies:

the vicissitudes of the early formation of the self determine the form and course of later psychological events which are analogous to the crucial early phase . . . certain periods of transition which demand from us a reshuffling of the self, its change and its rebuilding, constitute emotional situations which reactivate the period of the formation of the self.

Kohut then turns to one of these transitional phases:

The psychopathological events of late adolescence . . . —I would call them the vicissitudes of self-cohesion in the transitional period between adolescence and adulthood—should neither be considered as occupying a uniquely significant developmental position, nor should they be explained primarily as due to the demands of this particular period. But an adolescent's crumbling self experience should in each individual instance be investigated in depth . . . What traumatic interplay between

parent and child (when the child began to construct a grandiose-exhibitionistic self and an omnipotent self-object) is now being repeated? (367, 368)²³

It is such "traumatic interplay"—missed connections, failures in empathy and mirroring—that Shelley seems to have reexperienced (or reenacted, as Freud's repetition-compulsion would suggest²⁴) during his own late-adolescent crisis, a crisis which certainly inspired its share of narcissistic rage and retreat.

The narcissistic wounds—or "scars," as Freud calls them²⁵—that Shelley received during the winter and spring of 1810–1811 would have been unusually severe in that Shelley's mirroring sister and cousin, surrogates for the original, maternal source of love, in essence threw him over for his own idealized selfobject. Moreover, as former devotees of the young poet, Elizabeth Shelley and Harriet Grove not only had "mirrored" him in the more figurative (and psychoanalytic) sense of "confirming" or "approving," but had become for Shelley "second selves"²⁶ who resembled him physically and, for a time, ideologically.²⁷ Thus, their betrayal—and Shelley clearly regarded it as such—took on the bizarre and particularly mortifying character of a self-rejection. It is not surprising, then, that genuine "Self-esteem," the counterpart, not the obverse, of Love, would remain for Shelley an elusive gift, "for some uncertain moments lent" by an "unseen" and "inconstant" Power, as he would write in 1816 ("Hymn," ll. 37, 38, 1, 6).

Moreover, though as Jerrold E. Hogle has argued, Shelley never considered personal identity as something stable or even desirable,²⁸ it is evident that in the midst of the emotional upheaval that marked his nineteenth and twentieth years, Shelley was engaged in his most self-conscious and strenuous struggle to "conceive" himself. At the core of his endeavor is his debate with Hogg regarding the nature of love and self-sacrifice. While Kenneth Neill Cameron has painstakingly demonstrated that Shelley's "genesis" as a radical was a complex and gradual process, there is also something incredibly Gatsby-like in the way that Shelley (re)invents himself during his late adolescence: if he did not quite "spring from the Platonic conception of himself," he did become in his own mind "a son of God . . . [who] must be about His Father's business," like Christ himself who renounced all blood ties as meaningless (Fitzgerald 99).²⁹ To be more precise, as the self-styled "hapless victim of unmerited persecution,"³⁰ Shelley dispensed with Father—and father—in order to confront directly the Son who embodied his greatest persecutor and, as archetypal victim and incarnation of selfless love, provided him the "pattern" for his own suffering, his own identity, and his own Self-abnegation.

While dismissing a heavenly Father via a "systematic cudgel for Xianity"³¹ seemed relatively easy for the young skeptic, bypassing "the 'pater'"

was another matter (*L*, I, 47); and Percy's oedipally tinged clashes with Timothy Shelley pervade the 1810 and 1811 letters and resonate throughout his writings, from *Zastrozzi* to *Adonais*. Moreover, his resentment of Christianity and of his father converge as Shelley metes out blame for his severance, first from Harriet Grove and later from his sister Elizabeth. Yet it would be a mistake to view Shelley's violent execrations of the "horrid Galilean" merely as displaced hatred of his father (*L*, I, 66: 24 April 1811). As Shelley's often high-spirited letters to Hogg reveal, Timothy Shelley and his "equine argument[s]" defending Christianity provoke in his son more satirical laughter than rage (*L*, I, 38). In a strange way during this chaotic period of late 1810 to early 1811, Shelley was attempting to wrest from his father not his mother, whom he had already in a sense "lost," nor his sisters, who were still in varying degrees under Shelley's spell, but rather Christ himself, victimized—like Shelley—by such "bigots" as the superficially Christian Timothy Shelley.

If Shelley sometimes seems to conflate his father, Christianity, and Christ in those "mad effusion[s]" to Hogg that lash out at his own "tormenters," he already has discerned in Christ a more worthy opponent and idealized selfobject, to return to Kohut's terminology, than the rather unimposing Timothy Shelley ever could be (*L*, I, 74). The volatile mix of rage and contempt that we observe in the poet's dealings with his father during and after the Harriet Grove crisis points to a much earlier—Kohut might say "preoedipal"—experience of massive disappointment in the parent who should in fact serve as an "omnipotent selfobject." (Shelley's creative and energetic attacks on his father—"old Killjoy"—throughout his 1811 correspondence resemble Kohut's notion "oedipal dramatizing" that masks deeper narcissistic disturbances ["Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage" 371].) Kohut speaks of "stand-ins for the archaic idealized figure," and for the young Shelley, the powerful, captivating figure of Christ may have emerged originally as a surrogate for an essentially "unidealizable" father ("Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage" 390).³² The fact that Timothy Shelley promoted himself as an exemplary Christian certainly would have complicated matters; and it is intriguing to watch the young poet lecture his father on true "Christian forbearance & forgiveness," accusing Timothy of rank hypocrisy and presenting himself as the true Son (*L*, I, 140).³³

It is difficult to discern the origins of Percy's intense identification with Jesus, but this hypocrisy, both on his father's part and in the wider social sphere, may give us a clue. As Bryan Shelley writes, "however little exposure Shelley may have had to an authentic form of Christianity at home, he would have had access to its main text" (21). The poet's "addiction to reading the Bible," as this critic accurately puts it (22), seems to have begun early on, offering the boy memorable glimpses of the "extraordinary person" and "vivid poetry" of Christ, not "distorted" by the system that bears his name

(*Defence* 495). It was against the background of this system, doggedly preserved by perfunctory Christians such as Timothy Shelley,³⁴ that the morally earnest and keenly imaginative boy read vivid scriptural accounts of Jesus' life and words—and death. Moreover, the Church of England itself was in a particularly sad state during Shelley's time. The Anglican church that Shelley would have known was, in Robert Ryan's words, "intellectually becalmed, spiritually desiccated, and aesthetically impoverished . . . [its] official spokesmen . . . worldly, self-serving chaplains to the status quo in a repressive society" (20–21).³⁵ The profound hollowness and secularity of the contemporary English church may have made the young poet even more sensitive to and protective of the spiritual and "poetic" essence both of the Bible and of the figure who for Shelley was its supreme genius.

Even the most savage of the adolescent Shelley's later diatribes against Christ strike one as oddly possessive—Shelley longed for "that imposter, Christ"³⁶ to be *his* to emulate, *his* to crucify, *his* to purify, *his* to resurrect.³⁷ Embroiled in his own fervent *imitatio Christi*, with its insistent flavor of "emulation opposite," the young atheist at one point assigns himself the double role of Antichrist and Christ, while the latter, in Shelley's tangle of inversions, becomes his own "mighty opposite," Satan crushed by the true Christ, P. B. Shelley: "Oh how I wish I *were* the Antichrist, that it were *mine* to crush the Demon, to hurl him to his native Hell never to rise again" (*L*, I, 35: to Hogg, 3 January 1811). The final infinitive phrase, to complicate matters further, denies Christ his greatest triumph, the Resurrection, and establishes the Shelleyan pattern of "containing" Christ within the parameters of his human suffering.³⁸ Shelley's is the gospel not of Christ risen but of Christ crucified, the Christ who, in "present[ing] [his] bod[y] as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Romans 12:1), provided his young disciple/adversary the "paradigm" of glorious and agonized passivity that Shelley embraced as early as 1809 when he created the character of Verezzi.³⁹

In continually recreating—and reenacting—Christ's Passion, the poet can both "do" and "suffer," a favorite Shelleyan dialectic that at times seems a twisted version of the maxim offered by Milton's Christ: "who best / Can suffer, best can do" (*Paradise Regained*, III, 194–95).⁴⁰ Almost an objective correlative of the poet's lifelong ambivalence to Christ, this interplay between doing and suffering in Shelley's writing enables him to play the kind of double part exemplified in the previously cited letter. Thus Shelley can "guide the spear to the breast of [his] adversary" in order to "ensanguine it with the hearts blood of Xt's hated name," while receiving that same spear into his own breast as he imaginatively fuses with the persecutor who is also his victim (*L*, I, 29: 20 December 1810). As the crudeness and often amusing fury with which Shelley attacks Christ disappears with the passing of the Harriet Grove crisis and his elopement with Harriet Westbrook, he developed more

subtle techniques for punishing and emulating his rival, the idealized self-object whom the poet in his late adolescence began imperiously to absorb. He would lay claim to Christ's martyrdom by linking it directly to himself or to his protagonists, who would then heroically "suffer," at the hands of those who "do": the split off but still potent pole of the poet's extreme ambivalence to "the cold Christians' blood-stain'd King of Kings" (*Esdaile* 38: "A Sabbath Walk").⁴¹

The exaltation of passivity in Shelley's works—and this includes the sexual passivity embodied by male protagonists such as the *Alastor* Poet and Prometheus—seems, then, to have its roots in Shelley's early fascination and identification with Jesus' passive, selfless suffering on the Cross. The poignant image of "a youth / With patient looks nailed to a crucifix" would always hold deep attractions for Shelley (*PU*, I, 584–85). In part because of the poet's own temperamental and even physical affinities with the feminine gender—the latter of which were evident in his "delicate and fragile" build, his "frail, feminine, flexible" face, and his high-pitched voice⁴²—Christ's "womanly" mildness, "amiability,"⁴³ and passivity strongly appealed to Shelley. Moreover, at the same time that his desire to embody such qualities himself escalates (in proportion to his fear that "there is selfishness in the passion of Love" [*L*, I, 36]), so does his need to project them onto others increase in intensity. Such others include Harriet Grove, all of his young sisters, and eventually Harriet Westbrook, whose soul the newly wed Shelley will ask yet another of his female votaries—Elizabeth Hitchener—to "assist [him] to mould" (*L*, I, 13, 163).

Perhaps most audacious, though, are Shelley's attempts to "mould" Christ into his own image and likeness even as he endeavors to "follow" his predecessor onto the thorny path of self-denial. In light of Bloom's work on the *agon* with the precursor in which the "strong poet" must engage, Shelley's early 1812 project, the *Biblical Extracts*, with a hubristic Shelley in the self-appointed role of Christ's "editor," may strike us as an oedipally tinged enterprise. However, the two "strong poets" we are concerned with here do not quite fit the Bloomian profile of virile combatants engaged in "the crucial warfare of fathers and sons" (Gilbert and Gubar 47)—despite Bloom's caveat that if Freud's "is to serve as model for the family romance between poets, it needs to be transformed, so as to place the emphasis less upon phallic fatherhood, and more upon *priority*" (*Anxiety* 64).⁴⁴ Although Shelley in 1810 and 1811 regarded his "precursor" as a kind of romantic rival who lured from him his cousin and sister(s), he never saw Christ simply as a father figure to be toppled or even as a threatening masculine presence.⁴⁵ If, as Bloom claims, "all Romanticisms whatsoever, are quests to re-beget one's own self, to become one's own Great Original," Shelley's adolescent efforts at self-creation involve coalescing with a "Great Original" who resembled not so much

the penetrating Father as the (traditionally) receptive, self-abnegating Mother (*Anxiety* 64).

In seeing Jesus as a feminine figure, Shelley was responding to a rich theological tradition. First of all there is the key Biblical text in which Jesus presents himself as a feminine—and maternal—figure: “O Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” (Matthew 23: 37). Perhaps the most dramatic flowering of this theme appeared in the medieval devotion to a graphically maternal Christ. Carolyn Bynum’s fascinating study *Jesus as Mother* examines what she calls the “affective spirituality of the high Middle Ages,” expressed most explicitly in images of a pregnant and lactating Christ (80).⁴⁶ While the young Shelley probably had no direct knowledge of the devotional literature in question, the notion of a feminized Christ would certainly have been familiar. The “affective spirituality” that Bynum discusses had again taken root—this time in the England of Shelley’s boyhood. As G. J. Barker-Benfield writes, the eighteenth century saw a “movement for the softening of God’s face and the elevation of the suffering Son over the grim Father” (267). And the Son’s suffering, and his love, was presented throughout the hymns and sermons of the period in overtly feminine terms. In the hymns of Charles Wesley, for example, Christ the tender Shepherd provides his needy flock with nurturing, consoling breasts and a sheltering womb.⁴⁷ That this womb is actually a wound—“the cleft of [Christ’s] side”⁴⁸ received during the Crucifixion—suggests how Christ and/as woman contributed to the poet’s idea(l)s of sacrifice, selflessness, and suffering.

When Christ dwells in Shelley’s consciousness not simply as “that which injured me” but also as “the victim” of his own “severe anguish,” he exerts the greatest influence on Shelley’s self-conception (*L*, I, 32, 36). In taking Christ as his paradigm in the dual enterprise of fashioning a self and a viable doctrine of love, Shelley in effect attempts to create a “selfless identity.” As the 1810 and 1811 letters to Hogg and, later, to Elizabeth Hitchener, dramatically disclose, Shelley at that time was simultaneously engaging in self-conception and *Selbsttödtung*, the “Annihilation of Self” that Carlyle would later extol as the prelude to good works and “Blessedness.”

However, in Shelley’s case, his willful and premature efforts to achieve selflessness, heartbreakingly earnest though they were, often brought him closer to Narcissus than to Christ. By setting up the rigid dichotomy between Self and Love, he forced himself into the position of radical self-abnegation à la Christ and such feminine exemplars of disinterested love as Shelley’s favorite heroine, Antigone, and Eloisa, “who sacrificed all *self* for another” (*L*, I, 81). This dichotomy will at times evolve into a more fruitful dialectic—as in parts of the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” *Prometheus Unbound*, and the

Defence—but Shelley never lost his conviction that only “αφιλαυτία [lack of self-love],” which often comes perilously close to the “self-contempt” that Cythna warns against, can open the path to sympathetic love for others (*L*, I, 77; *CW*, I, 360; *LC*, VIII, 183). As the young Shelley systematically severed familial (and class) ties and fashioned himself into a liberal reformer and atheist, his feverish efforts not only to cleanse himself of “selfishness or interested ambition” (*L*, I, 30) but also to “divest [him]self of individuality”⁴⁹ may have prevented him from attaining the “self-cohesion” that according to Kohut’s model helps avert regressive, immoderate narcissism (Kohut, *Seminars*, 51).

Thus, it is the figure of the humble yet exalted martyr—with his “imperial crown of agony” (*CW*, III, 11: *Prologue to Hellas*, I, 89) or her “strange ruin” (*Cenci*, IV, i, 26)—rather than the (masculine) lover in search of his (feminine) “antitype” or “epipsyche” that comprises the archetypal image of the Shelleyan “narcissist,” an icon, like the hermaphrodite, of an uneasy marriage of opposites.⁵⁰ By embracing the stance of the martyr, Shelley can both assert and deny the self, as well as emulate and crucify the idealized selfobject who “betrayed” him. Moreover, those aspirations for selflessness that began to flourish with his first disappointment in (romantic) love and that spawned his martyr-like postures also gave rise to those attendant facets of his strange breed of narcissism: the urge to project the forbidden, necessarily imperfect self onto “a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness” (“On Love” 474) and the desire to incarnate “the Spirit of love” itself (*S-P*, I, 6).

My third chapter will address the former issue, which involves Shelley’s need to create for himself and his surrogates “sisters of the soul” with little independent status. I do, though, want to emphasize here that this tendency emerges not so much from some vague, universalized “masculine” appetite to devour or, as Alan Richardson puts it, “colonize” the feminine as it does from a particular set of circumstances in Shelley’s life that culminated in his violent renunciation both of Christ and of (him)self. Bereft first of Harriet Grove and then of his favorite sister Elizabeth, Shelley in 1810 and 1811 was nursing real grief compounded by deep narcissistic wounds when he rejected as “hateful” the “principle of *self*” (*L*, I, 34) and spurned his own idealized self-object, Christ. Thus, Shelley seems to have been left with an internal void—his “lack of self-love” (emphasis mine)—as well as with a gap in his object relations which he would desperately fill with female and male “others” such as T. J. Hogg, Elizabeth Hitchener, and Harriet Westbrook and, later, with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and her famous father. Upon discovering that “there is selfishness in this passion of Love” when he continued to covet his cousin’s affections (*L*, I, 36), it seems that Shelley became convinced that he must “fear himself” before he could love others, others who would allow him to cultivate “Self-esteem” indirectly by reflecting back to him his purest, most beautiful qualities (“Hymn” ll. 84, 37).

We can then, I believe, trace a direct lineage from Shelley's adolescent struggles to eradicate or "abstract" self (*L*, I, 173) to the "psyche/epipsyche strategy" which Richard Isomaki acclaims as Shelley's "mature version of love" (661) and which many have deplored as codified narcissism and sexism. While the latter judgement may be the more accurate, Isomaki's word *mature* is suggestive, for such later works as "On Love" (1818) and *Epipsychidion* (1821) reveal the ingenuity with which the older Shelley developed a conception of sympathetic love which would reinstate the self that he had continually and futilely tried to banish and/or punish since his earliest attachment to Christ.⁵¹ Selfhood threatens to return with a vengeance in these works via the narcissistic configuration of prototype and antitype, but essentially as the victim of "repulse and disappointment" ("On Love" 473) or, along with the beloved, "annihilation" (*Epi.*, l. 587). From selflessness back to selflessness: this is the cycle that produces and chastens Narcissus as he lurks in Shelley's consciousness.

Yet the postadolescent Shelley, still pursuing his Christlike goal of perfect "self conquest" (*L*, I, 180), not only devised a poetic strategy for indulging and then subduing his own "egotizing variability" (*L*, I, 44) but he also found a way to escape "the little world of self" by instead imaginatively *becoming* a "world of love" (*Defence* 497; *Epi.*, l. 346). When, for example, he calls his surrogate in *Adonais* "a Love in desolation masked"—properly endowed with Christ's "ensanguined brow"—Shelley ostensibly eliminates Self, which he consistently represents as the antithesis of Love (ll. 281, 305).⁵² In fact, though, such a stance effectively obviates the *object* (the "other" as well as the aim) of love and allows the self to embody and monopolize a kind of directionless or inward-directed love.

Roland Barthes has written, "No one wants to speak of love unless it is *for* someone" (74), but as Shelley learned when Harriet Grove disappeared from his life, or, even earlier, when his mother appeared to withdraw her affection, that "someone" can be elusive, hurtful, and even provoke in the lover the very selfishness which Shelley valiantly tried to sequester from "devotement and love" (*L*, I, 183). Shelley's hubristic desire, then, not simply to express but to incarnate love—as Christ himself did—emerges from his attempts to envision and advocate "love *infinite in extent*, eternal in duration" (*L*, I, 35), a love that is purged of "the dull vapours of the little world of self" as well as of an other who would tempt one toward this dangerous morass. Along with his penchant for martyrdom and his (ambivalent) embrace of a prototype/antitype model of interpersonal relations, Shelley's visions of himself *as* love offer us the most striking glimpses into the crucial battle between Christ and Narcissus as they struggle for ascendancy over Shelley's soul—while he just as strenuously battles against them both.

Shelley's Gothic Gospel: *Zastrozzi*

Even in the realm of Shelley's juvenilia we never encounter the kind of unadulterated love for Christ that would seem to warrant my use of the term *idealized selfobject* to describe his role in Shelley's psychological development. We hunt in vain through Shelley's works for pious meditations in the spirit of Thomas à Kempis (though like Thomas, whose language Shelley often seems to echo, his "chief concern" was to become "completely dead to self" [*Imitation of Christ* 31, 69]).⁵³ But when Shelley vows as a youth to "walk forth to war among mankind," he is both adopting Christ's mission "to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Luke 4: 18) and imitating his "meek" and "mild" character (*CW*, I, 252; *LC*, Dedication, ll. 42, 36, 32). Moreover, the fury with which the eighteen-year-old Shelley vilifies Christ and the concomitant desperation with which he attempts to emulate Jesus as a "conqueror of self" (*Imitation of Christ* 71)—both triggered by the breakup with Harriet Grove—reveal a pre-existing and deep-seated longing for merger with an omnipotent selfobject such as Christ.

Such a merger, according to Kohut, offers "narcissistic fulfillment" to the aspiring self as it gradually "assimilates" and "accommodates functions and capacities" of the idealized selfobject, be it a parent or a cultural icon such as Christ (Klein 318).⁵⁴ We cannot pinpoint a moment in Shelley's youth when the beloved Master became "this horrid Galilean" (*L*, I, 66), for Shelley's regard for Christ was probably always tinged with an ambivalence that would grow with his increasing enmity toward the Christian religion. Yet ambivalence and idealization are not mutually exclusive, as Shelley's representations of women and of sexuality remind us. Shelley would eventually come to (re)acknowledge Christ as the highest ideal of moral excellence, but the poet's sudden recoil from his loved selfobject in 1810, it seems, transformed gradual internalization (and healthy "narcissistic fulfillment") into aggressive absorption: he rejected and appropriated simultaneously, now yoking himself with Christ with the common appellation "wretch."⁵⁵

"The wretched Verezzi" is the first being we encounter when we enter the world of Shelley's first novel (*CW*, V, 5). Besides a handful of letters written between 1803 and 1808 and a few poems found in *The Esdaile Notebook*, Shelley's initial foray into Gothic territory, *Zastrozzi: A Romance*, comprises the earliest of his extant writings. If we accept Cameron's conjecture that Shelley composed this novel between March and August 1809—before he felt that his cousin Harriet was slipping away from him—it appears that the fixation on martyr-like suffering that pervades the 1810 and 1811 letters and much of the later poetry grew out of an already established preoccupation with Christ's suffering, represented in pictures hanging in Timothy Shelley's library (Cameron, *Young Shelley*, 124) as well as in Percy's own room (*L*, I, 102). Thus, it would

seem that when he finds himself prostrate "on the altar of [Harriet Grove's] perjured love," Shelley's radical appropriation of the Passion supersedes his early sympathetic identification with Christ as an "idealized selfobject" exemplifying self-transcendent love (*L*, I, 27). Although I believe that this is a largely accurate picture of Shelley's shifting attitude toward Christ, we must also take into account the fact that *Zastrozzi* did not appear until the spring of 1810. The clouds that began to gather over the cousins' engagement in September 1809—which while composing the novel Shelley must have anticipated and almost deliberately invited—may have affected Shelley's revisions, provoking him to heighten both his hero Verezzi's passivity and his suffering to reflect his own experience as an "outcast" (*L*, I, 27).⁵⁶

In a May 1810 letter to his friend Edward Fergus Graham, Shelley remarks on a mutual acquaintance's interpretation of *Zastrozzi* as an autobiographical novel: "If he takes me for any one whose character I have drawn in *Zastrozzi* he is mistaken quite" (*L*, I, 11). A pastiche of Lewis, Radcliffe, Dacre, and Walpole, among others, *Zastrozzi* embodies what Shelley would later describe to Godwin as a "distempered altho' unoriginal vision" (*L*, I, 266). Yet in an earlier letter to Godwin, the former "votary of Romance"—now sheepishly repudiating his adolescent Gothics—admits that both *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* "serve to mark the state of my mind at the period of their composition" (*L*, I, 227: 10 January 1812).⁵⁷ Besides modifying Shelley's original disclaimer regarding the personal nature of his first novel, this important letter to Godwin suggests a fruitful way to approach *Zastrozzi*: as an exercise in audience manipulation.⁵⁸ For Shelley in 1809 and early 1810, the most important members of his audience were Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley.

The January 1812 letter just referred to is only Shelley's second to Godwin, and it is the one in which Shelley narrates "the leading points of [his own] history," carefully chosen—and slightly distorted—to insinuate a teleology that seems providentially fulfilled when William Godwin enters Shelley's life, first as an author and then as a correspondent and friend (*L*, I, 229). Shelley closes the letter with a dramatic tribute that both flatters Godwin and implicates him—permanently, it turns out—in his young admirer's life: "To you as the regulator and former of my mind I must ever look with real respect and veneration" (*L*, I, 229).⁵⁹ As Stephen Behrendt has shown, Shelley demonstrates a keen awareness of audience in even his earliest writings, including his letters, and this letter beautifully exemplifies the nineteen-year-old Shelley's remarkable skills as a rhetorician and psychologist. But whereas in his initial letters to Godwin, he convincingly casts himself in the role of disciple, beginning with *Zastrozzi*, Shelley demonstrates that his natural talents and inclinations lie with cultivating his own disciples.

While the ostensible hero of the novel, "the hapless Verezzi," languishes in "torpid insensibility" or actual unconsciousness, his tormentors *Zastrozzi*

and Matilda tirelessly plot and carry out their designs against their prey (*CW*, V, 37, 11). Because the fiercely passionate Matilda longs to possess Verezzi sexually, Zastrozzi can exploit her obsession in order to avenge, we finally learn, his mother's ruin at the hands of Verezzi's father.⁶⁰ Verezzi himself must be destroyed as part of Zastrozzi's mission to "revenge [his mother's] wrongs" on her seducer's "progeny for ever" (*CW*, V, 102). In the course of his exploits, Zastrozzi manages to "convert" Matilda to "the doctrines of atheism" (*CW*, V, 90). Although at this point in his life, Shelley probably would have called himself a deist rather than an atheist, like Zastrozzi, he considered orthodox Christianity "a false and injurious superstition" and was anxious to convince his (female) loved ones of this, especially his sister Elizabeth and cousin Harriet (*CW*, V, 100).

Judging from the fury with which he reacts to the two young women's eventual return to Christ's fold, Shelley enjoyed quite a bit of success in his proselytizing until late 1810 and early 1811, when first his cousin and then his sister retreated from him.⁶¹ For Shelley, whose earliest audience was made up of a mother and young sisters who listened raptly as he spun his own tales or recited the poetry he learned at day school, his most coveted disciples would always be women.⁶² Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene could help him recapture his halcyon days at Field Place much more effectively than could Peter, James, or John. According to Medwin, one of the first recipients of Shelley's anti-Christian evangelism was the young Felicia Hemans (née Browne), with whom Shelley evidently carried on a "skeptical" correspondence in 1808 and 1809 until her mother—like the Groves after her—put a stop to it (59).⁶³ Following this (briefly) disheartening episode and the eventual "apostasy" of his sister and cousin, Shelley attempted, with varying degrees of success, to "illuminate"⁶⁴ and cultivate as disciples his sister Hellen, the poet Janetta Phillips (*L*, I, 73–74), Elizabeth Hitchener, and Harriet Westbrook. It is not surprising that Shelley's first reference to the latter in his correspondence is a request that his publisher John Stockdale "send a copy of *St Irvyne*, to Miss Harriet Westbrook" (*L*, I, 40: 11 January 1811). Analogous to his earlier gifts to Harriet Grove of *Zastrozzi* and of Locke's *Essay*, this tactic involves what Cameron in an amusing phrase dubs "subversion by remote control" (*Young Shelley* 296).⁶⁵

Shelley's first Gothic novel, which he sent to his cousin as soon as it was published, comprises one example of the "deistifying" that he engaged in from 1809 through 1811.⁶⁶ In this early novel, composed before Shelley had reason to excoriate Christ himself, neither Zastrozzi's condemnation of religion nor Verezzi's suffering strongly implicates Christ as a target for Shelley's own hostilities. Yet the readiness with which in late 1810 the bereft lover Shelley directed his wrath at Christ reveals that his own gathering of disciples not only imitated but challenged his precursor, to use the most apt term for the

dynamic at work here. After all, when Percy attempts "to make a deistical coterie of all [his] little sisters" and of his cousin Harriet—an enterprise which he had initiated long before his mother suspected it in early 1811—he is plundering Christ's flock in order to augment his own (*L*, I, 38).

However, before the onslaught of parental interference begins to undermine the cousins' engagement in late 1809, this largely unconscious "competition" with Christ resembles the gradual demystification of the idealized self-object and the internalization of his of her qualities that Kohut regards as the key to a stable sense of self and its attendant self-esteem. But once the young Shelley almost intentionally sabotages his first engagement and then bewails its destruction, he overtly pits himself against Christ and perversely refuses to dissociate him from the trappings of Christianity, ascribing to "cold Prejudice & selfish fear" the "Love of God Xt or the H[oly] G[host] (all the same)" (*L*, I, 70: 26 April 1811). In Shelley's mind, Christ has despoiled him of his own best-loved disciples, the cousin and sister whom he himself had originally enticed away from Christianity: "Xt how I hate thy influence" (*L*, I, 45: 12 January 1811).⁶⁷

Until Harriet and Elizabeth abandon him, though, Percy's deeply ingrained worship of selfless love and the Christlike mission he carved out for himself as an unhappy schoolboy suggest that he was heretofore careful not to identify Jesus himself with institutionalized Christianity. And not much later in his career, in works such as *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists* and *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, both written in the spring of 1812, Shelley will perceive and portray himself as one of the few true disciples who struggle to salvage the Master from his own wreck and restore to him his rightful throne, if not as the Godhead then as "the most just, wise, and benevolent of men" (*CW*, III, 57: Note to *Hellas*, l. 1090). Yet between Shelley's relatively untroubled boyhood embrace of Christ and his often troubled attempts to return to him as an adult, lies the largely uncharted territory of the adolescent poet's violent break with this "man of pure life" and pure love (*PS*, I, 396: Note to *Queen Mab*, VII. 135).

To turn back to the Gothic world of *Zastrozzi*, this early work is particularly intriguing in that it contains glimmerings of the clash to come: Shelley's decisive battle with Christ and with his own family. Because it straddles the relatively undefiled paradise of the young cousins' love and the gloomier region of romance gone awry, *Zastrozzi* offers us a unique glimpse into a key moment of transition or "liminality" in Shelley's personal, philosophical, and artistic development.⁶⁸ Perusing the pages of this "terror novel," we meet a playful sixteen year old cheerfully trotting out his Gothic paraphernalia and parodying—via his narrator—the moral platitudes offered by religious conformists.⁶⁹ But we also see a serious young propagandist, planting "calculated subversions" in his melodramatic text and thus in the minds of his readers

(Behrendt, Introduction to *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, xv). In a strange way *Zastrozzi* is a novel that records its own effects: it launches Shelley's controversial career as a romantic rebel and anticipates both its own reception and the impact of that reception (or rejection) on its author.

As mentioned earlier, Shelley seemed deliberately to court disaster when it came to his engagement to Harriet Grove. Although she was much more than a "convenient Muse" for the adolescent Shelley, those scholars such as Frederick L. Jones and Desmond Hawkins who underestimate Shelley's love for his lovely cousin do rightly remind us of something which Shelley himself must have realized on some level: that Harriet was an essentially conventional young woman, certainly not the soul mate and intellectual sophisticate that he would later discover in Mary Godwin (Holmes, *Pursuit*, 29). When he has *Zastrozzi* scorn the "false, foolish, and vulgar prejudices" of orthodox religion and characterizes Verezzi as an antimatrimonialist (*CW*, V, 48, 75), Shelley is equally intent on shocking as he is on "illuminating" his reader. Although it was not *Zastrozzi* itself that finally alarmed Harriet enough to consult her parents on Percy's suitability as a mate, this novel, with its barely disguised admiration of its villain, exemplifies the kind of ammunition with which Percy assailed not only his cousin's beliefs but eventually the relationship itself as well.

While Percy would never insult Harriet by explicitly likening her to the novel's villainess, as *Zastrozzi*'s "student" in atheism, "the guilty Matilda" (*CW*, V, 26) functions as a kind of surrogate for the young preceptor's own most cherished pupil (and also as a stand-in for the general reader). Matilda is highly "susceptible"—a favorite Shelleyan word and a quality that Shelley hoped to and apparently did find in his "amiable" cousin/fiancée as well as in his eldest sister. Desperate to possess Verezzi—in body if not in soul—Matilda eagerly drinks in *Zastrozzi*'s attacks on religion and on "the misguided multitude" (*CW*, V, 47). She accepts his challenge to "dare boldly, [to] strive to verge from the beaten path" in her quest: "Thus, by an artful appeal to her passions, did *Zastrozzi* extinguish the faint spark of religion which yet gleamed in Matilda's bosom" (*CW*, V, 48).⁷⁰ *Zastrozzi*'s triumphant "conversion" of Matilda parallels Percy's own victories over his cousin's conventionality, victories that the novel itself could either augment or undo, depending on how "towering" Harriet's mind actually was (*CW*, V, 48).

The Matilda who embraces "the doctrines of atheism" exhibits astonishing passion, tenacity, and resourcefulness that easily eclipse and finally destroy her paramour's true love, the pallid Julia (*CW*, V, 90). Until the novel's penultimate chapter, Matilda represents one possibility in terms of the reader's (i.e., Harriet's) response to its impieties: a firm and daring "contempt of religion" (*CW*, V, 90). Yet Shelley also includes in *Zastrozzi* an alternate reaction to its "speculations" when Matilda herself, pierced by "the arrows of

repentance," at the last minute rejects Zastrozzi's lessons (*CW*, V, 97). As his essentially conventional cousin was soon to do, Matilda (re)turns to "the shackles of prejudice, the errors of a false and injurious superstition," as Zastrozzi puts it (*CW*, V, 100). Simultaneously beckoning the young woman and pushing her away, then, this early work accurately forecasts Harriet's retreat into orthodoxy. Shelley would later write in a draft of his Preface to *Adonais* (1821), "As an author I have dared and invited censure";⁷¹ and as early as 1809 he was inviting—at least unconsciously—not only his cousin/fiancée's "censure" but her abandonment of him as well.

Perhaps Percy himself at least vaguely realized what he had done by flaunting his "Deistical Principles" (*L*, I, 26), when in the winter of 1810, he rages over the loss of Harriet, his persecution at the hands of his family, and his father's meddlings into his friendship with Thomas Hogg (a suspected "bad influence" on Shelley). At this point, Shelley's earlier identification with Christ as an exemplar of generous self-sacrifice radically metamorphoses into the murderous and suicidal fury that allows the "delirious" Shelley to conflate himself with Christ in a new way when he threatens to "stab the wretch in secret" (*L*, I, 29, 27).⁷² The dawning awareness that his own inflammatory compositions, such as *Henry and Louisa* (1809), *St. Irvyne* (1809–1810), and *Zastrozzi* itself, helped instigate the series of events that culminated in Shelley's break with Christ, with Harriet, and with his family could not have been of much comfort to the young author as he furiously scribbled that remarkable series of letters to Hogg between December 1810 and the spring of the following year.

Before turning away from *Zastrozzi* and toward works in which Shelley confronts Christ more directly, I would like to look at an even more intriguing aspect than this early novel's "containment" of its own primary audience: its adumbration of Shelley's own reaction to the reception/rejection with which that very audience would greet *Zastrozzi*, a text that is itself a kind of synecdoche for the subversive letters and literary works he was busily composing.⁷³ Read as a kind of dress rehearsal for the inevitable rupture with Harriet and with his own family, the novel carves out two divergent paths that Shelley could take once he dons the role of outcast that Verezzi and Zastrozzi share. Most important, it allows us to watch Shelley moving toward his quintessential role: that of the martyr.

Throughout the novel Shelley insistently opposes Zastrozzi's inexhaustible physical and mental energy and ceaseless activity with the torpidity of his prey. Whereas the Satanic Zastrozzi resolves "never to rest" until he accomplishes his vengeful purpose, we encounter the "hero" himself more often than not as "the unconscious Verezzi," more sinned against than sinning if only because of his utter inertia (*CW*, V, 16, 44). However, as Jerrold Hogle emphasizes, these antithetical characters in fact "melt into one another" as

Doppelgänger who are ruled by similar “propensities for self-damnation” (“Shelley’s Fiction” 79, 85). Hogle’s probing analysis focuses on structural aspects of Shelley’s fiction, but his remarks illuminate the biographical parallels that I am exploring. If Shelley the budding revolutionary, poised to wage war against his family’s religious, social, and political traditions, did not quite envision for himself the melodramatic descent into self-destruction and alienation that dooms his central male characters, he did project for himself the emotional and often physical isolation that torments both Zastrozzi and Verezzi. By the end of the novel, after imaginatively participating in Verezzi’s ineffectual passivity and Zastrozzi’s often frantic “energetical exertions,” Shelley implicitly rejects both approaches to the role of outsider—and of the martyr—that he anticipated for himself (*CW*, V, 48). To do *and* to suffer will become Shelley’s philanthropic ideal; though, as I stressed earlier, when it comes to Christ himself and Shelley’s complex identification with him, the latter tends to take precedence.

Taken as a composite character, Shelley’s first protagonist and his first villain incorporate the revolutionary spirit and capacity for suffering that the poet revered in Jesus and attributed to his own Christlike characters, particularly Cythna and Prometheus.⁷⁴ Unlike these later creations, though, Zastrozzi and Verezzi are merely victims and not—despite their “soul-illuminated countenance[s]”—heroic martyrs who sacrifice self for a worthy ideal (*CW*, V, 86, 103). As Hogle points out, they both “die with the same ‘bitter smile of exultation’ (V, 88) on their grim and tormented faces” (“Shelley’s Fiction” 85), but in fact they are sacrificed to the principle of vengeance—“the epitome of self-centredness”—and thus to the principle of Self that Shelley even in this earliest of his published works was attacking (Behrendt, Introduction to *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, xvii).⁷⁵ It is, however, vengeance, and vengeance on “the Incarnate,” that will soon dominate Shelley’s own thoughts as he grapples first with his impending and then with his actual loss of Harriet Grove (*Queen Mab*, VII, 163). Until the narcissistic wounds he incurred during this tumultuous romance began to heal, or, rather, scarify, Shelley could not overtly acknowledge Christ as his prototype of the selfless martyr. And to understand the way that he “avenged” himself on Christ, his own ideal-turned-rival, we must turn to a figure who never ceased to fascinate, even obsess, Shelley: the Wandering Jew.

The *Via Crucis* of the Wandering Jew

Beginning with his appearances—in *propria persona* or slightly disguised—in *St. Irvyne*, “Ghastly; or The Avenging Demon!!!” (1810), and *The Wandering Jew*, Ahasuerus shows up so often in Shelley’s works that Mary Shelley refers to him as “Shelley’s old favourite, the Wandering Jew” (*CW*, V,

ix).⁷⁶ When, as an unhappy schoolboy, the budding revolutionary resolves to “walk forth to war among mankind,” he clothes himself in the “linked armour” of Christ, himself a valiant *and* “mild” opponent of “the selfish and strong” (*CW*, I, 252: *LC*, Dedication, ll. 42, 41, 32, 33).⁷⁷ But in the fall of 1809, when Harriet Grove’s parents joined forces with his own mother and father in order to shield the young woman from Shelley’s blasphemies, it seemed to the young anti-Christian (not yet the aspiring “Antichrist”) that they were robbing him not only of Harriet but of Jesus as well, by claiming him as their own (*L*, I, 35). Rather than insisting at this juncture, as he will later, that Christianity has become Christless,⁷⁸ he perversely dissevers himself from Jesus, conceding him to the enemy camp and then lumping him in with family, religion, and convention itself as “that which injured me” (*L*, I, 32: 26 December 1810). Shelley never completely abandons Christ even during the years of his most venomous hatred of his “paradigm,” to return to Kierkegaard’s term, and he continues to pattern his own suffering and attempts at selflessness on Christ; but in the Wandering Jew, Shelley found an alternative to Christ as his model of the defiant outcast and martyr as well as a vehicle for his own aggression toward the “blood-stain’d King of Kings” (*Esdaile* 38: “A Sabbath Walk”).

The poet’s identification with Ahasuerus, however, does not simply emerge from that resentment of Christ which Shelley discharges in his 1810 and 1811 letters to Hogg. When Shelley invokes the Wandering Jew—as Queen Mab herself does in Canto VII—he is also summoning a number of other figures, such as Satan, St. Paul, and St. John, through whom he can explore his conflicting feelings toward Christ. George K. Anderson sums up the basic legend with which Shelley worked:

[It] is the tale of a man in Jerusalem who, when Christ was carrying his Cross to Calvary and paused to rest for a moment on this man’s doorstep, drove the Saviour away . . . crying aloud, “Walk faster!” And Christ replied, “I go but you will walk until I come again!” (*Legend of the Wandering Jew* 11)

Anderson and countless others have remarked upon Ahasuerus’ almost unrivaled appeal to the romantic imagination, which seized upon and transformed him into an Ancient Mariner or a Childe Harold. As Crook and Guiton point out, the Wandering Jew “obsessed Shelley to a greater degree even than it did his contemporaries” (29), but most commentators, including those I have just cited, ignore the crucial confrontation between Christ and Ahasuerus that ignited Shelley’s imagination at the same time that it troubled his conscience.⁷⁹

By reenacting this confrontation and its aftermath, Shelley can both punish and be punished by Christ and even (obliquely) reunite with him by