Exciting the Sublime:

Terror, Interiority, and the Power of Shelley in *The Cenci*

by

Kaitlin Gowan

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved April 2011 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Mark Lussier, Chair
Ronald Broglio
Douglas Corse

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

ABSTRACT

The most horrific, darkest, and powerful forms of the sublime take place inside the enclosure of the human psyche; the interior of the mind is the playground for the sublime—not the crag and canyon filled natural world. For Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, the driving force of the power of the sublime stems from the feelings of pain and fear: where is that more manifested than in the mind? Unlike the common, traditional, and overwhelmed discussion of Percy Shelley and his contemporaries and the power of the sublime in nature, I will argue that in *The Cenci*, Shelley, through well-chosen diction and precise composition of terrifying images, fashions characters and scenes in an emotion-driven play that elevates the mind of the reader to a transcendent sublime experience. Through a discussion of the theories of the aesthetic of the sublime laid out by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, I will provide a foundation for the later discussion of the rhetorical sublime evoked by Shelley in the ardent and horrifying play that is *The Cenci*. Looking at the conventional application of the theories of the sublime to romantic writing will make evident the holes in the discussion of the sublime and romantic writings that have almost forgotten the powerful and psychological rhetorical aspect of the sublime that is emphasized in the theoretical writings of both Burke and Kant. To clarify what is traditionally associated with Shelley and the sublime, a brief analysis of the Shelleyean sublime and Shelley's 1816 poem "Mont Blanc" will prepare the reader for an unconventional, but every bit important and powerful, function of the sublime in

the 1819 play *The Cenci* based on the horrific happenings of a historical 16th century Italian noble family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside."[1]

The phenomenon of the sublime is most often associated with the natural world—the impressive, awe-inspiring depth of a canyon, or the overwhelming height of Mont Blanc. These natural, exterior objects have been the foundation and center for the rhetoric of the sublime in romantic writings. And thus, one tends easily to forget the power of the mind, the power of the interior when discussing the sublime. The most horrific, darkest, and powerful forms of the sublime take place inside the enclosure of the human psyche; the interior of the mind is the playground for the sublime—not the crag and canyon filled natural world. For Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, the driving force of the power of the sublime stems from the feelings of pain and fear: where is that more manifested than in the mind? Unlike the common, traditional, and overwhelmed discussion of Percy Shelley and his contemporaries and the power of the sublime in nature, I will argue that in *The Cenci,* Shelley, through well-chosen diction and precise composition of terrifying images, fashions characters and scenes in an emotion-driven play that elevates the mind of the reader to a transcendent sublime experience.

[1] Georges Poulet, "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," *Reader-Response Criticism,* Jean Tompkins, ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 42.

Through a discussion of the theories of the aesthetic of the sublime laid out by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, I will provide a foundation for the later discussion of the rhetorical sublime evoked by Shelley in the ardent and horrifying play that is *The Cenci.* Looking at the conventional application of the theories of the sublime to romantic writing will make evident the holes in the discussion of the sublime and romantic writings that have almost forgotten the powerful and psychological rhetorical aspect of the sublime. To clarify what is traditionally associated with Shelley and the sublime, a brief analysis of the Shelleyean sublime and "Mont Blanc" will prepare the reader for an unconventional, but every bit important and powerful, function of the sublime in the 1819 play *The Cenci* based on the horrific happenings of a 16th century Italian noble family.

As the focus on aesthetics became more and more popular during the eighteenth century, theories of the sublime too began to grow in prominence. Longinus' essay *On the Sublime,* which was initially composed during the first century, fell to almost nonexistence in the literary world until it was translated into English in 1652, but only really came to achieve widespread popularity starting the 1730's with the English translation by William Smith.[2] However, due to its popularity during the eighteenth century, it is quite relevant in the sublime that became popular during the romantic era. Its focus on rhetoric can be attributed to its birth in the classical era, and plays an important role in this argument. When discussing the sublime it would be a grave mistake not to give

[2] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 9.

Kant the deserved recognition for really being the forefather to that which is the romantic sublime. By creating such a precise philosophy of the aesthetic, Kant continues to play a significant role in the discussion of the sublime. His *Critique in Judgment* provides the strongest contribution to the application of the sublime in *The Cenci*. Although less present in this discussion, Burke's *Enquiry* is ever as important, as it puts into words the power of human emotion upon which the sublime experience depended, most specifically the passions of terror and fear on such an experience. Burke is credited with being the theorist who "established the aesthetic of terror and pain [and] found a physical explanation for the aesthetic experience" that is the sublime.[3]

Thomas Weiskel, in 1989, wrote *The Romantic Sublime,* which today is still considered the guide for understanding the function of the sublime during the romantic age. Without providing too much unnecessary information, this section shows how the theories of the eighteenth century on the sublime are brought to meaning and adjusted during the romantic age. Samuel Monk's *The Sublime* is also useful in this discussion as it helps to show the progression from the enlightenment thinking to that of the romantic age and how the theories of the sublime assisted in facilitating that transition. The two distinctions of the sublime that Weiskel defines in his book, the "negative" and "positive sublime" are discussed briefly. The "negative sublime" is where the focus of the discussion on *The Cenci* is based, as it is also most closely related the sublime theories of Kant and Burke.

[3] Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 235.

There is no question that Shelley was a different type of romantic writer than the earlier generation of romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge. And, the discussion on the Shelleyean sublime and the traditional criticism on the sublime application in Shelley are important to understand. "Mont Blanc" is the centerpiece for the critical discussion of the sublime in Shelley, and it is a poem that beckons the language of the high sublime most notably found in Shelley's predecessors. Yet, at the same time, it also shows the transformation that Shelley takes with the sublime, moving it farther away from its original foundations in the divine, to a more atheistic transcendence where nature is the all-powerful.

The analysis of *The Cenci* begins with a brief discussion on the impact of drama on the mind and the idea of mental theater. By looking at Shelley and *The Cenci*, the reader quickly is made aware of the power of the story that Shelley brings to life in his play, as well as being drawn into the power of his language in the play and how important and imbedded the sublime is in that language. An overview of the sublime aspects of the two main characters, Beatrice and Cenci, and the character development of Beatrice starts the analysis of the play. The last section of analysis focuses on two main scenes, and it is within these scenes that Shelley's power as author, as creator, is brought to life.

CHAPTER 2

THE SUBLIME

Longinus wrote the commentary "On the Sublime," part of his larger discussion *Peri Hupsous,* in the first century. He provides an explanation of why it can be categorized as the sublime while at the same time providing the necessary steps to achieve the sublime in one's own work. Longinus begins by calling the sublime "a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse."[4] Unlike many philosophies of the sublime, and two of which that we will discuss later in Kant and Burke, Longinus does not focus on the sublime in the natural world, but rather the ability to create the sublime experience through writing, be it spoken or read. Longinus acknowledges a person's ability to persuade as powerful, but claims that "Grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearers; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant…amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of the hearer."[5] Therefore, sublimity is produced through grandeur in writing that moves the hearer to a state of "amazement and wonder."[6] For Longinus "sublimity…produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow;" his discussion on the sublime focuses in on the power of the writer to

[4] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 137.

[5] *Ibid*,.137.

[6] *Ibid*,. 137.

produce language that is so perfected that it is magnificent, and thus capable of leaving the hearer or reader in a state of sublime experience.[7]

Longinus explains that to "avoid the faults which are so much tied up with sublimity," one must achieve a "genuine understanding and appreciation" of that which is sublime.[8] His goal in this essay is to do just that—provide the knowledge needed to understand and recreate the sublime. Producing a piece of writing that fits the category of the sublime creates for the writer an eternal presence…the sublime elevates both the writer and the hearer to a new level of greatness. For Longinus, it is part of human nature to be affected by the sublime, and he begins by explaining what constitutes the sublime by saying that it must, at the very first encounter, move the "mind to greatness."[9] If something is experienced multiple times and it fails to affect the hearer, then it cannot be deemed sublime and ultimately remains "only for the moment" failing to create an eternal presence for the creator.[10]

Longinus lays out five sources of sublimity—basically the five things one can do to achieve the sublime. The first thing needed to reach the sublime is the power to conceive great thoughts; second, strong and inspired emotion; third, certain kinds of figures (thought and speech); fourth, noble diction; and last,

---

[7] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 137.

[8] *Ibid*,. 138.

[9] *Ibid*,. 138.

[10] *Ibid*,. 138.

dignified and elevated word arrangement.[11] For the section on greatness of thought, Longinus claims that "those whose thoughts and habits are trivial and servile all their lives cannot possible produce anything admirable or worthy of eternity."[12] If you want to create something elevated and sublime, then your thoughts must be on par with what you are attempting. He suggests that a way to get on par with such elevated thoughts is to recall the great writers who achieved such success before. Homer is a favorite reference for Longinus, and he says, "Homer has tortured the words to correspond with the emotion of the moment, and expressed the emotion magnificently by thus crushing words together. He has in effect stamped the special character of the danger on the diction" and if you want to achieve such greatness…replicate what he has done before.[13] The requirement for strong and inspired emotion falls into being a part of the rest of the categories. It is quickly understood that every aspect of that which is needed for the sublime to some extent requires the production of strong and inspired emotion.

From the discussion on kinds of figures needed in thought and speech to produce the sublime, the explanation of hyperbaton plays the largest role in understanding Longinus' theory in application to this argument. "Hyperbaton is an arrangement of words or thoughts which differs for the normal sequence…it is

---

[11] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 138.

[12] *Ibid*., 139.

[13] *Ibid*., 141.

a very real mark of urgent emotion."[14] When a person experiences "anger, fear, or indignation" they do not speak calmly and collected in clear, concise sentences; rather, the staccato aspect of their speech signifies their emotion.[15] Hyperbaton is a way to imitate that natural disjointed aspect of speech that signifies being affected by "anger, fear, or indignation," and it ultimately "throws the hearer into a panic…and forces him in his excitement to share the speaker's peril. The very audacity and hazardousness of the hyperbata add to the astounding affect."[16] Similar to the use of figures in creating the sublime is the technique of producing proficient and elevated word choice.

Noble diction is an important aspect of what makes the sublime because it involves the specific words and aspects of creative speech that will eventually excite the reader, if used effectively. The use of metaphors make up a large part of the discussion on choice diction. For Longinus, "strong and appropriate emotions and genuine sublimity are a specific palliative for multiplied or daring metaphors, because their nature is to sweep and drive all these other things along with the surging tide of their movement."[17] The sublime takes over like a "whirlwind" and as hyperbata moves the hearer on to experience the very emotions of the speaker, metaphors too participate in sweeping the hearer on

[14] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 146.

[15] *Ibid.*, 146.

[16] *Ibid.*, 146.

[17] *Ibid.*, 148.

"with the surging tide of their movement."[18] Through Longinus' use of adjectives to describe the sublime, it becomes apparent to the reader that the sublime is a force; it is not just an experience…but also something powerful that moves the individual in a way that nothing else can. "The choice of correct and magnificent words is a source of immense power to entice and charm the hearer."[19]

The last ingredient in the recipe for the sublime is the need for a dignified and elevated word arrangement. The way that the piece is composed makes the final contribution, and it is an important one as it affects the document on the whole. Longinus bestows the composition of the document with the power of "penetrating not only the ears but the very soul…the combination and variety of its sounds convey the speaker's emotions to the minds of those around him and make the hearers share them."[20] How the speaker combines the elevated thought, use of figures, and noble diction creates the strong and inspired emotion needed to generate the power to enrapture the hearer moving them towards an experience with the sublime. "Shall we not then believe that by all these methods it bewitches us and elevates to grandeur, dignity, and sublimity both every thought which comes within its compass and ourselves as well, holding as it does complete domination over our minds?"[21]

---

[18] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 137, 148.

[19] *Ibid.*, 147.

[20] *Ibid.*, 152.

[21] *Ibid.*, 153.

Longinus believed in the power of the sublime, and the importance to produce it in writing. Without the production of the sublime, the writing had no purpose, no lasting value. It is the sublime that makes something worthy of eternal recognition. It is hard to argue against Longinus' claim when we still today, well more than 2000 years past the time of production, recognize the greatness in Homer's work. "So when we come to great geniuses in literature…we have to conclude that such men, for all their faults, tower far above mortal stature. Other literary qualities prove their users to be human; sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god."[22]

Longinus' essay is focused on the production of the sublime and language as the source for the sublime; however, he says, "it is by nature that man is endowed the power of speech" and therefore, ultimately gives the power of the sublime back to the natural. Sixteen centuries after Longinus laid out his formula for the sublime, German philosopher Immanuel Kant produced the *Critique of Judgment*, which with precise methodology describes the aesthetic of the sublime, which draws its focus on nature, and the power of the natural. The sublime for Kant, in simple terms, is more about the power of an object in nature on the faculties of the mind than any of the other aesthetic aspects he describes. "The beautiful seems to be taken as the presentation of an indeterminate concept of understanding, but the sublime as that of a similar concept of reason."[23] The

[22] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 151.

[23] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 431

mind's ability to reason is what is focused on because most often that object which is deemed sublime is too great to understand. Kant begins the "Analytic of the Sublime" with a basic description of what the sublime is…not what constitutes it, but rather what it creates in the person experiencing it. The object encountered that is to be considered sublime is one that "without any rationalizing…excites in us the feeling of the sublime…countrapurposive for our power of judgment…unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that."[24]

The sublime is a power that takes hold of the mind, creating a "momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them; hence as an emotion it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination."[25] Kant is recognizing and describing the transcendent experience that is involved with an encounter with the sublime. It halts the "vital powers" for a brief moment and takes over the mind.[26] It is not just fun and games for Kant, but this power—it is a "serious" activity of the mind, and one that is created only through the magnificence of the sublime.[27] It is important to understand that before Kant delves into the systematic description of what constitutes the sublime, he first

[24] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 431.

[25] *Ibid.,* 431.

[26] *Ibid.,* 431.

[27] *Ibid.,* 431.

emphasizes how important it is to the human, to the mind. And, throughout the "Analytic" he reemphasizes that the sublime is an aesthetic that deals with the mind, "we can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason."[28] The object that is sublime "cannot be contained in any sensible form" because it "surpasses every measure of the senses."[29]

The sublime is divided into two categories for Kant, the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. The faculty of cognition is associated with the mathematical while the faculty of desire is associated with the dynamical aspect of the sublime—"thus the object is represented as sublime in the twofold manner intended."[30] In terms of the mathematically sublime Kant says, "We call sublime that which is absolutely great…that is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small."[31] The emphasis in the mathematical is on the magnitude of objects in categorizing them as sublime. The idea of infinity is important, although Kant recognizes that it is difficult to determine whether or not something is actually infinite, so for the discussion of the sublime, "nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the

[28] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 431-32.

[29] *Ibid.,* 432-33.

[30] *Ibid.,* 433.

[31] *Ibid.,* 433.

idea of infinity."[32] Kant distinguishes between an object being sublime and the mind considering it and believing the object to be sublime in its greatness; "the magnitude of a natural object on which the imagination fruitlessly expends its entire capacity for comprehension…which is great beyond any standard of sense and hence allows not so much the object as rather the disposition of the mind in estimating it to be judged sublime."[33]

While the mathematically sublime is organized around that which is absolutely great in terms of magnitude, the dynamically sublime describes that which is sublime in terms of absolute power, which has "dominion" over other objects containing some limited power.[34] So an object, including nature, can be judged as dynamically sublime as long as it is considered an object of fear. "We can, however, consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it, if namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely think of a case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile."[35] The end result of an encounter with the sublime is a transcendent experience that is positive, so it might appear at first to be "anti-" that end result by including that which creates fear in the category of the sublime. However, as Kant goes on to explain that the object that will "make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power…becomes all the more attractive the more

[32] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 435.

[33] *Ibid.,* 436.

[34] *Ibid.,* 438.

[35] *Ibid.,* 438.

fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety."[36] It is important that the person encountering the sublime is not actually in danger of being dominated by the power, but rather removed enough to understand and experience its fear; thus, allowing the mind to attempt to reason and understand its ultimate power, which will, by definition of the sublime, be beyond our senses and will then "elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level" into a sublime transcendent experience.[37] Kant explains this to be the case because when you are far away enough to remove yourself from imminent danger of something with so much power, you can see the aspects worthy of admiration and respect. This admiration and reverence to something so great is a key aspect of what characterizes something as sublime, both mathematically and dynamically.[38]

Ultimately, for Kant, "that is sublime which pleases immediately though its resistance to the interest of the senses" be it absolutely great in size or power.[39] While similarly for Edmund Burke, who wrote *The Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful,* that which is sublime "excites the ideas of pain" because pain is a "more powerful" emotion than pleasure; thus,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the

[36] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 438.

[37] *Ibid.,* 438.

[38] *Ibid.,* 439.

[39] *Ibid.,* 441.

sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[40]

For Burke's aesthetic of the sublime, the focus is on human passions and emotions, and that which inspires those. It is the passion of self-preservation and that which inspires those emotions in the human mind that can be deemed sublime because they "turn wholly on pain and danger" and those strong emotions lead us to experience the sublime and transcendence.[41] What comes out of an experience with terror, fear, pain, or danger—an experience with the sublime, in its most powerful state, is the passion of astonishment. "Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."[42] And this astonishment, this "great power of the sublime…anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force."[43] This reaction to the sublime is similar to Kant's philosophy as it affects the mind, and the power of the sublime is once again, as it is in Burke also, focused on the mind and the "irresistible force" of the sublime taking over for a moment.[44]

Inanimate objects of nature are not the only source that can inspire the passions that lead to the sublime; for Burke, anything, large or small, can be capable of "raising ideas of the sublime because they are considered objects of

---

[40] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime an Beautiful*, (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 59.

[41] *Ibid.*, 59, 61.

[42] *Ibid.*, 95.

[43] *Ibid.*, 96.

[44] *Ibid.*, 96.

terror."[45] Terror is an important emotion or passion, because terror is "in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling power of the sublime."[46] Therefore, that which causes terror, great in size or not, is still sublime because it is great in power and has the power to incite the passion of fear and terror which leads to the sublime. Burke substantiates his claim about the connection between terror and the sublime by providing examples of multiple languages, both classic and modern, that connect the words for "astonishment or admiration" very closely with those words that represent "terror."[47] What does play a key role in the aesthetic of the sublime in terms of the terrible is the level of obscurity of the object considered. Burke states that in order for something to be terrible, and thus sublime, obscurity is a necessity because "when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" and without apprehension, astonishment or amazement is lost and therefore the sublime too vanishes.[48]

Burke makes clear in his aesthetic, unlike Longinus, that imitation does not lead to the sublime. However, Burke explains that "the most lively and spirited verbal description…raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects; but then it is in the writer's power to raise a stronger emotion by the description…the proper manner of conveying the affections of the mind from one

[45] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime an Beautiful,* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 97.

[46] *Ibid.,* 98.

[47] *Ibid.,* 98.

[48] *Ibid.,* 99.

to another, is by words."[49] Imitation is not capable of properly communicating the power of the sublime, and by imitation, for clarification, Burke is speaking more directly to art forms, but through words, through language, one can "raise a stronger emotion" and create the effects of the sublime on the minds of those hearing the description.[50] Similar to Longinus' description of the power of using hyperbaton to excite the sublime in language, Burke says, "the mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness."[51]

Beyond those objects that create terror through obscurity and danger, for Burke, like Kant, power plays a significant role in describing the aesthetic of the sublime, and how the sublime is judged.

> Besides these things which directly suggest the idea of danger, and those which produce a similar effect from a mechanical cause, [Burke knows] of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power…pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because never submit to pain willingly. So that strength, violence, pain, and terror are ideas that rush upon the mind together.[52]

And these, then, produce a sublime experience. During the conversation of power and the sublime Burke brings into the account the sublimity of the deity.

---

[49] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime an Beautiful*, (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 102.

[50] *Ibid.*, 102.

[51] *Ibid.*, 106.

[52] *Ibid.*, 110-112.

Something that is divine, or all powerful, clearly fits into the discussion of the sublime. When we "contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner annihilated before him."[53] And although Kant was not speaking in terms specifically of the sublime, we can see the similarity here with Burke in terms of the argument of all-powerful, and absolute greatness and how it clearly constitutes an object of sublime perception.

Burke spends a large portion of his text outlining every aspect of what can create terror or pain, and therefore in some respect can participate in the aesthetic of the sublime. Some of these include the ideas of succession and uniformity, magnitude, difficulty, magnificence, vastness, vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence among others. Among the last descriptions of what is important in the discussion of the sublime, for the sake of this argument, Burke discusses that of infinity. What is infinite, like the previous philosophers, will contribute to the sublime because of the mind's inability to comprehend such enormity. "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delighted horror, which is the most genuine effect, and the truest test of the sublime."[54]

From the first century to the eighteenth, the sublime has been a driving force of philosophical conversation, and as is seen through the theories presented, what constitutes the sublime can be created through the power of language. For the writers of the romantic age, the discussion on the sublime was anything but

---

[53] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime an Beautiful,* (London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 119.

[54] *Ibid.,* 129.

quiet. The sublime was being discussed in philosophical circles as well as literary, and much of that can be attributed to the writers who embraced the amazing powers of the awe-inspiring sublime, bringing to life the sublime in poetry and prose.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

A clear transformation occurred that moved literary thought from the rigid, rule-following ideals that filled the enlightenment to what would become the romantic era, and much of that transformation was rooted in the aesthetic of the sublime and the breaking of the once unyielding rules that were all but inherent to the romantic sublime. The eighteenth century was full of discourse on the aesthetics, including the sublime, and the thoughts and theories that were produced during the eighteenth century would lead up to the theory of the sublime that was manifested in the writing of the literary stars of the nineteenth century. In *The Sublime,* Samuel Monk painstakingly thrashes out the theories of the sublime that overwhelmed the eighteenth century and he viewed "all of these theories as an important link in the chain of ideas that, through various transformations, connects organically the literature of the Augustan age with that of the age of Wordsworth."[55] Two decades after Monk's review of the literature on the sublime, Thomas Weiskel wrote the definitive book on what constituted the aesthetic of the sublime for the romantics: *The Romantic Sublime.* As Weiskel writes, "The Romantic sublime was an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation—spiritual,

[55] Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 3.

ontological, and (one gathers) psychological and even perceptional—was failing to be exercised or understood."[56]

"Longinus was to become the patron saint of much that is unclassical and unneoclassical, and eventually of much that is romantic."[57] Monk's first theory discussed is that of Longinus because it played a significant role in the transformation of sublime thought. Longinus was unlike other classical writers stuck in precise rules and conventional forms and there was no room for those when the sublime held the purpose of "awakening the emotion in the audience."[58] It is the focus on emotion, and the reader/audience too that would put Longinus in a driving role of the development of the sublime aesthetic for romantic writers. What is important to the development of the romantic sublime from Longinus is the power of the writing, and of the sublime, on the reader or audience. "Already in Longinus…is metaphor presiding over the illusions endemic to reading: we are uplifted as if instinctively, and our proud flight exalts our soul *as though we had created* what was merely heard (7.2)."[59] The transference of greatness and elevated thought is a fundamental theme in romantic writings.

Of utmost importance to the romantic sublime was the idea of transcendence; "the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in a feeling and

---

[56] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 4.

[57] Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 15.

[58] *Ibid.,* 11.

[59] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 4.

in speech, transcend the human."[60] This is a radical idea that man can, be it through an experience with nature or even poetry, become for a moment filled with thoughts that go beyond the human—beyond the capacity of man to something greater. Thus, essential in the romantic sublime is an aspect of the transcendent sublime experience that is more than human, which, traditionally, was the inclusion of the divine. For a brief moment, a sublime experience lightens the "burthen of the mystery" and as Wordsworth, key in the discussion of the sublime during the romantic age, says, "we see into the life of things."[61] Weiskel calls Kant the "chief philosopher of the sublime" and looks to his description of transcendence for help in understanding what constituted the romantic sublime transcendence.[62] He says that for Kant during the "moment of the sublime the surface is broken, the discourse breaks down, and the faculties are checked or suspended: a discontinuity opens between what can be grasped and what is felt to be meaningful."[63] Similarly, Wordsworth describes the moment of sublime as something that "suspends the comparing power of the mind & possesses it with a feeling or image of intense unity, without a conscious

---

[60] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 3.

[61] William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798" *British Literature 1780-1830*, Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), lines 39,50.

[62] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 7.

[63] *Ibid.*, 21.

contemplation of parts."[64] As it was for Kant and is for Wordsworth, the sublime is about a moment of meaning, and one that a human cannot grasp or reason with because it is beyond human knowledge and the capacity for understanding.

What experiences created the sublime moment for romantic writers too are based in in the theories of Kant, as well as in Burke. The power and greatness of nature, which is discussed heavily in Kant, creates the feelings of terror and fear, a strong emphasis in Burke, and as Angela Leighton claims that the power and greatness of nature was, for the romantics, the basis of the sublime; an experience with nature, nature that is so great it inspires fear, is that which the moment of transcendence is based.[65] The obsession with transcendence and the meaning or knowledge that comes through the power of the sublime spread throughout the romantic era, and Weiskel claims that it was not just about recreating the sublime for the writers of this era, but the real "excitement [was] in the making of meaning" for the romantic writers.[66] Wesikel provides a noteworthy distinction between two types of sublime that were present during the romantic era: the metaphorical or negative sublime and the metonymical or positive sublime. The metaphorical sublime can be described as the sublime where "the absence of determinate meaning becomes significant…since it resolves the breakdown of discourse by subsitition;" Weiskel refers to the negative sublime as the "Kantian,"

---

[64] William Wordsworth, *The Prose of William Wordsworth, 3 vols.* Ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), II 353-4.

[65] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13.

[66] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 22.

"natural" or "reader's" sublime.[67] The positive sublime is defined by Weiskel as occurring when "overwhelmed by meaning, the mind recovers by displacing its excess of signified into a dimension of contiguity which may be spatial or temporal."[68] The negative sublime is the moment where the reader or hearer is raised to an elevated state and in the immediate moment following, the mind is overwhelmed by something with which it cannot understand or describe and thus in the positive.

During the romantic era, writers needed something more than the traditional limitations of the aesthetic of the sublime and transformed it to apply to the needs of their idealistic time. The theories of Longinus, Kant, and Burke all had a profound impact on the writing of the romantics and it is through their theories that the romantic writers came to truly define and embrace all that is sublime.

[67] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 28.

[68] *Ibid.*, 29.

CHAPTER 4

TRADITIONAL EXPLORATION OF THE SUBLIME AND SHELLEY

What constitutes the aesthetics of the "Shelleyean sublime" is still a contested topic today. Most scholars would argue that the sublime is based in the philosophy of Kant and Burke, as is the case with the traditional discourse on romantic sublime and holds true to the discussion of Shelley. There is an agreement that Shelley's sublime is different than that of the first generation romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, but to what effect is still up for debate. Some critics, such as Angela Leighton, would argue that over time Shelley's radical and empirical ways transformed somewhat to a more idealistic radicalism that embraced (for the most part) the aesthetic of the sublime of his romantic forefathers.[69] "Shelley shows a susceptibility to the effect of the sublime in the natural world which challenges such rigid empiricism, and forces him to confront again the opposition between reason and poetry…Shelley… reveals a susceptibility to natural grandeur which poses a threat to his philosophic reasoning."[70] Others, and for the most part in more recent discourse, such as Peter DeBolla and Cian Duffy, would argue that the current conception of the Shelleyean sublime is based on a foundation full of holes and the discourse on the romantic sublime in general during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century needs to be reexamined. Duffy argues that, unlike Leighton, Shelley did not leave behind his most radical politics for a more idealist

[69] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 27.

[70] *Ibid.,* 34-35

philosophy in his later days, but rather Shelley's sublime poems are just as revolutionary as those from his youth.[71]

Although what truly defines the Shelleyean sublime is clearly a contested view, for the purposes of this argument, the more traditional and universally held belief that the Shelleyean sublime develops out of a foundation in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Burke's *Enquiry* will be accepted as the basis for Shelley's philosophy on the aesthetic of the sublime. In *Solitude and the Sublime,* Frances Ferguson asserts that "Burke and Kant [are] virtually the exclusive exemplars of eighteenth century and romantic discussion of the philosophical issues" that make up the sublime discourse.[72] Shelley's "Mont Blanc" is the showpiece for his sublime writing and most representative of what is traditionally associated as the Shelleyean sublime in terms of the traditional discourse on the romantic sublime and the importance of nature. Shelley's "Mont Blanc" partakes in the "well-established tradition of…inspired writing associated with the landscape of the Alps" and the first generation romantic poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth with who Shelley was quite familiar.[73] Through "Mont Blanc" one can see the influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge; yet, at the same time, one can see Shelley diverging, establishing his own distinct "aesthetic of the sublime" one of

[71] Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

[72] Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individualism,* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[73] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49.

a "struggle between Power and its interpretation in words."[74] For Shelley, the sublime experience is one that develops out of an experience with nature, most specifically an experience with Mont Blanc. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, the sublime experience and its connection with the divine were of the utmost importance and focus.

> This familiar landscape of the sublime [Mont Blanc] is one which presents Shelley not with signs of the Deity…he confronts the landscape of a religious conversion, he describes an autobiographical experience of awe, fear, and enlightenment and he too uses the language of exalted and personifying address…However, unlike Coleridge, Shelley questions the model within which he writes…The power of the mountain is addressed within a framework which has long presumed a divine model for that Power; a model with the atheist must reject.[75]

As Shelley was a pronounced atheist, his sublime (a notable difference from that of the romantic sublime discourse of the earlier generation of writers) lost the focus on the divine in a transcendent sublime experience and he was left to think about the vastness of the human mind and that which man cannot grasp. "The sublime scene, for Shelley, is one which opens up distances that, like endless circles of sleep, are 'inaccessible' to the mind;" it is not about an experience with the divine for Shelley, but rather about experiencing something beyond the

[74] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49.

[75] *Ibid.*, 62.

capacity of the human mind.[76] Ferguson writes that Shelley "identifies the sublime as the aesthetic operation through which one makes an implicit argument for the transcendent experience of man."[77]

Even though the divine is avoided in the equation of the transcendent sublime for Shelley, the sublime harnesses a great power, one which leads to a transcendence that enlightens beyond traditional human understanding and therefore plays a significant role in his writing. Shelley writes in an 1816 letter about his first encounter with Mont Blanc, "the immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness."[78] The rhetoric of the sublime is bursting out in Shelley's letter. The intensity of the landscape affected him in a way that it had the early romantics, and which "diverges strongly from his earlier anti-Christian empiricism."[79] Shelley is not embracing the divine and turning his back on atheism; however, he is moved in a way that becomes more idealistic and leans away from his rigid empiricist views, opening him up to the power of nature and the sublime.

---

[76] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 70.

[77] Frances Ferguson, "Shelley's *Mont Blanc:* What the Mountains Said," *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed (London: Methuen, 1984), 213.

[78] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 2 vols.* Ed. Frederick L. Jones, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1.497

[79] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 39.

CHAPTER 5

THE SHELLEYEAN SUBLIME AND "MONT BLANC"

The association of the sublime with nature is one that the first generation romantics knew well and explored deeply, and Mont Blanc was a mountain that inspired such exploration for the likes of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth wrote poems about sublime experiences that occurred through the viewing of Mont Blanc; for Coleridge, it was “Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni,” and for Wordsworth, Mont Blanc plays a significant role in the “Prelude.” Shelley titles his poem “Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni,” which automatically draws in a parallel attaching significance to the first generation romantic writers on the sublime. Shelley’s choice to add the line to his title: “Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” begs the association to Coleridge and Wordsworth. In addition to the connection to Colerdige’s title, one of Wordsworth’s most famous poems about the sublime, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” is mimicked in the title of “Mont Blanc.” In addition to purposely drawing the connection through the title to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” Shelley starts off his poem with a line that makes a close resemblance to the end of the description of the sublime transcendence in “Tintern Abbey.” Shelley starts, “The everlasting universe of things” (1), and Wordsworth writes, “While with an eye made quiet by the power / of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / we see into the life of things” (48-50). Shelley’s language also mimics that of the earlier writers using the language of the “high sublime” using terms that describe the intense landscape of the

mountain and surrounding area and automatically bringing a reader familiar with the rhetoric of the sublime to thoughts of the awe-inspiring powers of nature and the intensity of that power that leads to transcendence.[80] By making this association to the sublime writers of the previous generation of poets, Shelley is preparing the reader for a sublime poem, one that most closely reflects the sublime of those earlier writers.

"The everlasting universe of things," the universal knowledge and understanding that is associated with a transcendent sublime experience "flows through the mind" (1,2). The first section of "Mont Blanc" is describing a sublime experience where one gains for a moment a "universal" knowledge and understanding of the world. Shelley associates the experience with the natural landscape; it is from the "secret springs" that "the source of human thought" is discovered and understood (4,5). It is the unending, perpetual aspects of nature such as the waterfalls that "leap forever" and the "vast river / over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves" where the sublime experience originates (9, 10-11). Immediately, Shelley throws the reader into a description of the power of the sublime and more importantly, the power of nature and its participation in the sublime. Mont Blanc has yet to be mentioned, but the reader is made prepared to better understand what Mont Blanc will represent through this initial description of "the everlasting universe of things / flow[ing] through the mind" (1-2).

The second section of the poem starts to describe the view in front of the poet; in the description of the landscape he easily navigates from the natural

[80] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

description of the stunning landscape to a supernatural personification of the "many-voiced vale" and the "ice gulfs that gird his secret throne" (13,17). The "his" in the prior quotation references the mountain itself, Mont Blanc. In addition to switching to a super natural description, Shelley also invokes the rhetoric of the sublime by describing the landscape in front of him as an "awful scene / where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down" (15-16). For Shelley, this scene is "awful" in so much as being "worthy of, or commanding, profound respect or reverential fear" and "solemnly impressive; sublimely magical."[81] There is an emphasis on the magical while Shelley continues to describe the natural in terms of the supernatural where "the giant brood of pines around thee clinging / Children of elder time" (20-21). The "earthly rainbows" cover across the "etherial waterfall" on the mountain, both a mixture of the natural and supernatural (25,26). The mountain defies the rules of nature by piercing into the realm of the supernatural through its "power" and "its own deep eternity" (16,29). It is nature that is infinite and all powerful in Shelley's description of the mountain.

During the second section of the poem Shelley fully embraces the sublime mountain.

> When I gaze on thee
>
> I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
>
> To muse on my own separate fantasy
>
> My own, my human mind, which passively

[81] "Awful, adj.". OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press.

Now renders and receives fast influencings,

Holding an unremitting interchange

With the clear universe of things around. (34-40)

The poet explains that he "seem[s]" to be in a sublime trance (35). Yet, he is not fully committing to the transcendence that is typically associated with the sublime. He is on the verge of a full transcendent experience and describes the beginning stages of an open "human mind" which "passively" experiences the effects of the sublime scene (37). It is this stage of the "presublime" that Shelley is often associated with—always resistant to fully embrace the effects of sublimity.[82] The poet repeats and emphasizes that it is his fantasy that is being mused on in this experience and his mind: "my own separate fantasy," "my own," "my own human mind" (36,37). Shelley is stressing his continued control. He has not given up his complete control to the power that is the sublime. Although he appears to be on the verge of submitting himself to the sublime trance, the reader remains aware that the poet is still dominant. Even though he claims to have a passive mind, he makes sure the reader knows that it is his mind, and that his mind is still human. His mind has not been elevated in that moment to understand and see beyond human capacity.

For poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth, the sublime transcendence was an experience that involved gaining knowledge beyond human capacity, a divine knowledge. Through gazing on the infinity of nature, the magnitude of the mountains, these poets would experience a sublime moment with the divine,

[82] Paul Endo, "*The Cenci*: Recognizing The Shelleyan Sublime," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, (Vol. 38, Iss. 3-4, 1996) 379-97.

becoming for a moment raised to a more than human experience and filled with a divine knowledge and understanding. Coleridge's poem on Mont Blanc starts similarly to Shelley's, praising the "awful form" of "sovran Blanc" and describing the Arve and how it "ceaselessly" raves on (5,3,5). Yet, quickly the language changes and the difference between the sublime for Coleridge and the sublime for Shelley becomes clear. Coleridge gazing on the "vast" mountain rapidly is moved and becomes "entranced in prayer" (23,15). Coleridge uses religious terms like the "soul" and how "her natural form, swelled vast to heaven," creating another difference with the language that Shelley uses (21,23). And ultimately, it is the sublimity of the mountain that leads Coleridge to "utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise" (69).

The sublime is a religious experience for Coleridge and Wordsworth, the early generation romantics. The sublime in nature leads to a transcendent experience with the divine. The emphasis on the divine was important to the sublime understanding of transcendence. Weiskel claims that the sublime required a "god-term" or figure in order to follow how the early romantics viewed the production of the sublime.[83] It is through this that what is uniquely Shelleyean in sublime thought becomes clear in "Mont Blanc." Shelley proves that you no longer need the divine to experience the sublime in its fullest effect. Although Shelley's "Mont Blanc" so obviously evokes the sublime of the early generation romantics, he quickly establishes himself as different, but still just as sublime.

[83] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 249.

Shelley embraces the power of the sublime and the infinite knowledge that one can gain through an "unremitting interchange / with the clear universe of things around," but it is clearly not a divine experience (39,40). The supernatural or occult is heavily involved in Shelley's view and experience with Mont Blanc. It is the supernatural experience with the sublime of the mountain that leads to the "still cave of the witch poesy" and the "ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee, / some phantom" become present for the transcendent moment, until they are recalled (44,46-47). The supernatural, the "witch poesy," and "ghosts" of the natural landscape come during the sublime experience to make clear "the everlasting universe of things" (44,46,1). Shelley shows that the sublime does not need to be an experience with god or the divine. "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky / Mont Blanc appears—still" (60). Mont Blanc "pierc[es] the infinite," thus, it is itself infinite, pushing the bounds of natural human thought to the supernatural (60). Nature pierces the finite earthly realms into the infinite universe for Shelley, not the divine. And, Shelley shows how the power of nature on the human mind, through the sublime, is just as revealing.

Shelley goes beyond denying the use of religious language and references to the divine by confronting the very issue of the divine and faith at the end of the third section of the poem. It is the "mysterious tongue" of nature, of the "wilderness" that "man may be…with nature reconciled" (76,78-79). There is no need for the divine when nature, the powerful nature, can fulfill that role. It is the voice of the mountain, of Mont Blanc, that holds the power to

Repeal

Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood

By all, but which the wise, and great, and good

Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (80-83)

Shelley does not require a transcendent experience from the sublime that provides a "blessed mood" or where one becomes "a living soul" to "see into the life of things."[84] Nature is not the avenue that opens up the power of the sublime for a divine-like transcendence, as is the case with the generation of writers alongside Wordsworth and Coleridge. Nature itself is all powerful. Nature itself holds the "voice" of the infinite knowledge (80). It is through nature, for Shelley in "Mont Blanc" that one can experience the sublime and become "reconciled" with "the everlasting universe of things" (79,1).

[84] William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye duing a Tour, July 13, 1798" *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), Lines 42,47,50.

CHAPTER 6

THE SUBLIME AND *THE CENCI*

Traditionally, one associates dramas with the theater and the stage, but as Aristotle says in the *Poetics* when discussing tragedy, "the plot ought to be constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place."[85] The power of drama and tragedy, especially, is that it evokes emotions within the audience. Alan Richardson explains that

> the romantic poets as dramatists held…that such mental drama would emerge with most intensity through reading, which "presents to the fancy just so much of external appearances as to make us feel we are among flesh and blood, while by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character.[86]

The real drama then comes from the staging of the play in the reader's mind; the production inside one's head becomes the most powerful form of the play. The reader becomes one with the action in the play because the action is intensified and emotion absorbed as it is performed in the reader's mind. Poulet explains this phenomenon as the taking over of the reader's consciousness by the consciousness of the book, "For how could I explain, without such take-over of

[85] Aristotle, "Poetics," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 98.

[86] Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1955), 2.

my innermost subjective being, the astonishing facility with which I not only understand but even feel what I read."[87]

The Cenci easily fits into the category of the mental drama because it is focused on interiority and the mind of the characters, and thus with Poulet, the mind of the reader. Additionally, in terms of space, the play takes place within the confines of the Cenci palace, later Castella Patrella, and lastly within the walls of a prison. Interior walls enclose the action of the entire play. The confines of the palace not only limit the freedom of the characters, but also represent the power of Cenci—the head of the house that the family is contained within, and also the reason that they are locked in the prison cells. Cenci, even in death, was completely in control of every aspect of their being. Jeffrey Cox in *In the Shadows of Romance,* emphasizes the interiority of the drama when he says, "moreover, their claustrophobic atmosphere suggests man's isolation from meaningful contact with others. Man is trapped within his skull."[88] Samuel Monk credits Burke's *Enquiry* for "turning the attention of theorists to the sensation and the psychological influences that accompany and determine the aesthetic experience" at a time that began to give birth to the prevalence of romantic images and terror in writing and ultimately to the romantic era.[89] Weiskel emphasizes this change when he defines the term "negative sublime." "The intentional structure of the negative sublime as a whole implies the

---

[87] Georges Poulet, "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," *Reade-Response Criticism,* Jean Tompkins, ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 44.

[88] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 144.

[89] Samuel Monk, "The Sublime: Burke's *Enquiry*," *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism,* Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 41.

conversion of the outer world into a symbol for the mind's relation to itself."[90] Through this definition, Weiskel expresses the start of a change from nature as being the most important aspect of the sublime to the mind. This is reinforced by Shelley's own words on the role of a poet from the "Preface" to *Prometheus Unbound*,

> A poet is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the natures of others; and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers; he is not one, but both. Every man's mind is, in this respect, modified by all the objects of nature and art; by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness.[91]

Shelley understands the significance of his role as poet, as creator, and realizes the magnitude of the effect that it can have upon the reader. In the "Preface" to *The Cenci*, Shelley expands on this idea of exciting emotions within the reader and the power to affect one's mind. When introducing why Shelley decided to turn the historical story of *The Cenci* into a drama, he explains that it is "a tragedy which has already received from its capacity of awakening and sustaining the sympathy of men, approbation and success."[92] He is fully aware from the beginning of the power of the story that he has decided to retell in drama. And through his own writing, in the role of poet, Shelley intends to stir and inspire the

---

[90] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 85.

[91] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *Prometheus Unbound, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 208.

[92] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 142.

emotions of his own countrymen with this tale that has "the magic of exciting in the human heart" like the

> deepest and sublimest tragic compositions, King Lear and the two plays in which the tale of Oedipus is told, were stories which already existed in tradition, as matters of popular belief and interest, before Shakespeare and Sophocles made them familiar to the sympathy of all succeeding generations of mankind.[93]

He was aware of the sublime power of the tragic story of the Cenci family, and knew that if composed as a drama, he would have a lasting effect on men.

The story retold by Shelley in the play is that of a late sixteenth-century family, the Cenci, who were run by an evil and tyrannical father. Count Francesco Cenci held to no laws or morals and often bought his way out of trouble with the help of a cardinal close to the Pope. By paying off the Pope, Count Cenci secured his power, and his status within the community of Rome. The first scene of the play describes a conversation between Count Cenci[94] and Cardinal Camillo, where Cenci shows his ability to buy his way out of punishment. The play continues with Cenci describing his joy that two of his sons were killed, and it is this scene that spurs the actions of the rest of the play. Beatrice, his daughter, is appalled by her father's comments and speaks back to him in defiance and disgust. Cenci, angered by her insolence, conspires to make her suffer for her

---

[93] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 142. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically by act, scene, and line.

[94] Count Cenci will be referred to as "Cenci" for the remainder of the discussion.

actions. As Cox says, "Cenci has tried to mold his world to his own nightmarish desires, and Beatrice is the last person to resist him."[95] Cenci discovers a way to torture his daughter a degree beyond all others: rape. Beatrice, her stepmother Lucretia, and her brother Bernardo ultimately all scheme against Cenci, their oppressor, and arrange to have him killed as they feel it is the only way to survive; they cannot go on living under his reign. Without pardon from the Pope, who disregards the evil doings of Cenci, the three of them are put to death for their deed. It is through the emotional details of this devastating story that Shelley is able to affect the reader.

Beatrice and her father, Cenci, are the two most powerful players in the drama. This is not just because the significant action of the play revolves around Cenci and Beatrice but more so because of what they represent. For all that is evil in Cenci, there is good in Beatrice. They represent the poles of power—a polar opposite power where one is based in goodness and the other in self-satisfying evil. Shelley uses the idea of self-anatomy—or self-analysis—as a pillar in the comparison of good, evil and power. Shelley "transforms the struggle between good and evil by viewing it in the light of his analysis of self consciousness."[96] It is not so much about power for Shelley that makes one good or evil, but rather about one's ability to turn inward and understand all of his or her selfish desires and act on them---and thus, with his or her power manipulating all of those around. The tension between Beatrice, who represents the ability to control and

[95] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 153.

[96] *Ibid.,* 156.

not act on all aspects of selfish desire, versus her father, who has structured his entire life on selfish desire and used his power to manipulate all aspects of it, including the church, to best fit his wants.

During the first scene of the play, the reader is introduced to the evil and power that is Cenci. Cenci and Camillo, are discussing Cenci's recent payment to the Pope that "hushed up" "the matter of the murder" (I.i.1). It is clear through the conversation between the two characters that this is not the first time Cenci has paid off the Pope to keep himself out of persecution for his unlawful actions. The ability to manipulate and pay off the ruler of the Church, the institution that is supposed to uphold the strongest moral code, reveals the level of power that Cenci controls. Cenci's power goes beyond a household and extends to a society. This realm of power is reaffirmed in a later scene of the play where other powerful men from Rome fear the retribution from upsetting Cenci and standing up against him; "Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy" (I.i.143). Shelley uses the first scene of the play to develop Cenci's evil character and to develop the polar pull between the extreme corrupt power that is Cenci and the innocent, good, and equally powerful daughter, Beatrice.

Shelley first brings Beatrice into the play in line 43 of the first scene through a reference to her, which is almost as quickly as the reader is introduced to the villain Cenci; "Where is your gentle daughter? / Methinks her sweet looks, which make all things else / Beauteous and glad, might kill the fiend within you" (I.i.43-45). The audience is introduced to Cenci's opposite—his daughter, who becomes the source of the conflict throughout the play. Shelley describes the

historical Beatrice in the preface as being "one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together."[97] Although this is a subtle introduction to her character, it shows her power. Camillo, who knows Cenci and his wrongs well, feels that Beatrice has the ability, the power, to "kill the fiend" that exists in Cenci and leads him to such terrible deeds (I.i.45). Beatrice is an opposite power to that of her father, while she remains innocent and gentle; yet, she is still just as powerful. She "shares with her father a strength of mind and will" and while Cenci uses it against others, Beatrice resists that temptation."[98]

The build up and presentation of power in these two characters hints at their sublime powers. "That magnitude of a natural object on which the imagination fruitlessly expends its entire capacity for comprehension must lead…it to be judged sublime."[99] Although people are not ordinarily grouped into the category that represents sublime objects, especially that in nature, Shelley presents these two characters with an expression of power that makes the connection undeniable.

> Yet, I fear
> Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze,
> Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
> And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
> My hidden thoughts (I.iii.83-87)

---

[97] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 142

[98] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 150.

[99] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 436

The diction Shelley chose to use for this commentary by Orsino references traditional rhetoric of the sublime. He starts with the description of Beatrice provoking a "fear" within him, which as previously discussed in the commentary on the sublime, is a significant aspect of what constitutes the sublime (I.iii.83). Additionally, to say that her gaze is "awe-inspiring" calls on the classic descriptions of the sublime in nature, and one cannot deny Shelley's understanding of that when he himself used the similar term "awful" in his irrefutably sublime poem "Mont Blanc"(I.iii.84).[100]

An additional signature aspect of the sublime, which holds true for the romantic understanding of the sublime as well as the Shelleyean sublime, is the idea that an experience with the sublime leads to a transcendent experience where one gains a knowledge beyond the traditional capacity—one's mind is moved to a new level. "That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses."[101] Orsino says that Beatrice's gaze analyzes him piece by piece and moves him to a point where he sees his "hidden thoughts" (I.iii.87). Beatrice embodies the sublime in a human form through evidence of her power over others—even if, unlike her father, she lacks the terror aspect of what is sublime. The similarities, in terms of their power over others, between Beatrice and Cenci start to become evident. Cenci commands a power that finds its basis in fear and terrorizing those around

[100] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 97- 100 (line 15).

[101] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 433.

him into bending to his wants and desires. For Kant and Burke, power, fear, and terror are a central part of categorizing aspects of the sublime.[102] It is in this way that Cenci embodies the sublime. Cenci warns his guests during the feast celebrating the death of his sons, "Beware! For my revenge / Is as the sealed commission of a king / that kills, and none dare name the murderer" (I.iii.96-98). Cenci also claims to be, to an extent, super natural in his evil; "I bear a darker deadlier gloom / than the earth's shade, or interlunar air / or constellations quenched in the murkiest cloud" (II.ii.189-91). Cenci's evil goes beyond that of earthly darkness and doom. Shelley chooses specifically to use such language to emphasize the dark, evil sublime aspects of Cenci's character.

Cenci decides that the real way to submit his daughter to the ultimate level of torture is through forcing her to become what she most despises—like him. By submitting her to a forced participation in incest and the overwhelming terror that is involved with such a rape, and by hoping to continue his own line in her, being "fruitful in her," Cenci anticipates his success in forcing her to be like him: completely evil and no longer innocent (IV.i.143). Whether or not Cenci is successful in his ultimate goal to corrupt his daughter into being like him is a contested topic amongst *Cenci* critics.[103] During the last act of the play Beatrice and the others involved in Cenci's murder must stand in front of the judges.

---

[102] "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger…whatever is in any sort terrible…is a source of the sublime" Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 134. "Thus as dynamically sublime, only in so far as it is considered an object of fear" Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 438.

[103] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 155.

Marzio, one of the hired killers, is brought before the court. Marzio is fearful of Beatrice, which goes beyond his fear in general of having to pay for his involvement in this murderous plot. When Beatrice approaches Marzio in this scene, Shelley inserts the stage directions that he "covers his face and shrinks back."[104] He is afraid to gaze on her sublime presence and the power she holds just in a gaze—just as it was with Orsino.

Beatrice is insisting on her innocence and expecting Marzio to do the same for her. This is the first sign, for many, that she has become like her father. Rather than take responsibility for her actions and acknowledge the crime her father committed against her in an attempt to try and explain, or for that matter justify, her situation, she attempts to manipulate others to her will. This culminates with a scene in act five when Beatrice forces Marzio to look at her so she can take power over him with her gaze, "fix thine eyes on mine, / Answer to what I ask" (V.i.82-83). Marzio responds to her gaze, "Oh! / Spare me! My brain swims round… I cannot speak…" (V.i.88-89). She has gained her power and has manipulated him to claim that he is the guilty one, taking responsibility for the crime. Beatrice successfully manipulates Marzio using her power in a way much like her father would.

It is this scene that the critics claim is evidence of Beatrice's transformation into using her power for self serving rather than good. And it is quite clear that in this scene, she does fall below the virtuous level she has been held to throughout the play.

---

[104] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), Act V Scene ii Stage Note.

> Beatrice does appear to adopt her father's habit of meeting charges with lies and pious exclamations of God's support for her actions. She also has a nightmare vision of a universe dominated by her father, where "all things then should be…my father's spirit (V.iv.60). Such a vision would seem to signal Cenci's success.[105]

There is no argument that in that moment during the trial Beatrice falls to temptation and uses her incredible power over others in an attempt to save herself regardless of who she sacrificed in the midst of it. Whether this signifies Cenci's ultimate success, even after death, is debatable. Beatrice is quickly restored to a more familiar countenance of good, comforting her petrified family. She goes into a despair asking heaven to "forgive weak thoughts!" (V.iv.56). Beatrice realizes she sank from her goodness and quickly repents. This is unlike anything that resembles her father. He never felt guilt or remorse for his deeds because he felt completely entitled to them.

> But I delight in nothing else. I love
> The sight of agony, and the sense of joy
> When this shall be another's, and that mine.
> And I have no remorse and little fear,
> Which are, I think, the checks of other men. (I.i.81-85).

He was too involved with himself that he truly believed anything he did that was self serving, any suffering caused, was justified as long as they served his desires.

[105] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), 155.

The play ends in a very beautiful moment where Beatrice calmly accepts her fate and comforts those around her.

Give yourself no unnecessary pain,
My dear Lord Cardinal. Here, Mother, tie up
My girdle for me, and bind up this hair
In any simple knot; aye, that does well.
And yours I see is coming down. How often
Have we done this for one another; now
We shall not do it anymore. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, it is very well. (V.iv.159-165)

Beatrice is restored to her caring, innocent, and gentle self. She is human, and humans slip to temptation, but unlike her father, she is willing to admit her fall and restore her goodness; and more importantly she recognized the difference. It is for this reason that there is difficulty in making the outright statement that Beatrice fulfilled her father's last wish.

The sublime aspects of these characters are important overall to Shelley's desired outcome in the play. He made clear in the "Preface" that this drama has the "magic of exciting the human heart" and it is that very power—the sublime power of exciting emotion within a reader that Shelley fully embraces throughout *The Cenci.*[106] Through the lens of the theories of the sublime laid out by Longinus, Burke, and Kant, Shelley, as described in the introduction, through well-chosen diction and precise composition of terrifying images, fashions

[106] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci*, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 142.

characters and scenes in an emotion driven play that elevates the mind of the reader to a transcendent sublime experience. The two scenes in which Shelley's power over the reader is highest are when the reader experiences the vivid pain of the devastated Beatrice after the rape in act three and the intense evil of Cenci as he vacillates among ways to fully destroy his daughter in act four. These powerful, emotion-provoking scenes lead the reader into a sublime experience.

The reader first sees the character of Beatrice in the first act during the dreadful banquet scene, after the initial reference to her by Camillo. Cenci is rejoicing over the death of his sons and Beatrice reveals herself as noble, courageous, and defiant towards her repressive father. Beatrice entreats the other noble families in attendance at the banquet to rescue her and her stepmother from the wretched grasp of the father,

> His wife remains and I, whom if ye save not,
> You may soon share such merriment again
> As fathers make over their children's graves
> Oh! Prince Colonna, thou art our near kinsman,
> Cardinal, thou art the Pope's chamberlain,
> Camillo, thou art chief justiciary,
> Take us away! (I.iii:123-28)

Beatrice's courage is accentuated when she makes the appeal in front of her father. The guests see the desperation in her plea yet they refuse to help. Mid-speech, Cenci realizes what his daughter is saying and threatens the guests to pay her no attention,

I hope my good friends here

Will think of their own daughters—or perhaps

Of their own throats—before they lend an ear

To this wild girl. (I.iii:129-32)

It is the outright defiance that Beatrice shows during the banquet, and the embarrassment she caused to her father puncturing his pride that sets in motion the actions of the rest of the play. It is here that the reader first sees that Beatrice is "trapped by a family tyranny and sexual politics."[107] Cenci proclaims, "I know a charm that shall make thee meek and tame" and he resolved to make her pay for her disobedience (I.iii:167).

At the immediate onset of the third act, the reader is prepped for a disjointed and chilling scene with Shelley's stage direction: "(She enters staggering, and speaks wildly)." Beatrice enters the scene in disarray both "staggering" and speaking in an uncontrolled, irrational way. Beatrice's first words are that her "brain is hurt;" she does not comment on the state of her body but the action that caused her "hurt" was so brutal that it damaged her mind (III.i:1). The imagery the language produces is horrifying: Beatrice describes her "eyes are full of blood" (III.i:2). Lucretia assures Beatrice that she has no physical wound but it does nothing to calm her state. She is losing control as she tried to complete a thought she pauses and exclaims "Oh horrible!" (III.i:8). The reader witnesses the hysteria that has overcome Beatrice as she cries out that

The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls

[107] Stuart Curran, "Shelleyan Drama," *The Romantic Theater*, Richard Allen Cave, ed. (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe/Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1986), 75.

Spin round!

I see a woman weeping there,

and standing calm and motionless, whilst I

slide giddily as the world reels…My God. (III.i:9-12).

At only twenty lines into the scene, the reader is swept into the whirlwind of emotion that is overtaking and controlling Beatrice. The reader like Beatrice, is being tossed and tormented with terrifying images of "heaven flecked with blood," "the dead breath in charnel pits," and a "contaminating mist" that is eating away at Beatrice and "dissolves [her] flesh to a pollution, poisoning / the subtle, pure and in most spirit of life" (III.i:13, 15-16, 17, 21-23). The audience member experiences through action on stage, and the reader understands through stage directions that amidst the horrifying imagery, that Beatrice loses more and more control as each moment passes, at one point proclaiming that she is dead—"No, I am dead" (III.i:26). And, like the onset of the hurricane of emotional torment that Beatrice undergoes, it ends abruptly:

What hideous thought was that I had even now?

'Tis gone; and yet its burthen remains here

O'er these dull eyes…upon this weary heart!

O, World! O, Life! O, Day! O, Misery! (III.i:29-33)

Calmness comes over Beatrice but the calamitous event that produced her debilitating pain and hysteria remains, "the burthen remains here" and she is forced to live under the terrible encumbrance of the rape (III.i:30).

Just as with Beatrice, the reader left with a fear-filled anxiety from witnessing the destruction of Beatrice's sanity as a result of the terrible act by her father. Shelley explains in the "Preface" how Cenci raped his daughter, thus even without the mention of rape in the lines of the play, the reader's prior knowledge of the act adds to the detrimental effects of witnessing Beatrice break down. The rape by Cenci alone is disturbing enough for a reader to grasp, but, through the production/writing of the scene post-rape, the reader witnesses the moment-by-moment destruction of Beatrice whose emotions are spewed like a tidal wave of pain. The reader no longer is witness to, but becomes enveloped in the overall effect. For a moment, the pain and destruction becomes reality for the reader and the action that causes the hurt mind of Beatrice threatens and hurts the mind of the reader.

The reader undergoes a sublime experience while engaging with this devastating scene. Kant says that something is "dynamically sublime in so far as it is considered an object of fear" and he continues that "we can, however, consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it, namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely think of a case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile."[108] Weiskel explains this more fully when he says that Kant "postulates a defensive reaction of the mind which will give us "courage" when there is no danger…the mind cultivates a state of imagined terror in order to perform a factitious

[108] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 438.

transcendence."[109] The definition provided by Kant on the "dynamically sublime" coincides with the reader's experience in the first scene of act three because although one might not personally fear Cenci in a sense that he will rape them, one can and does imagine being Beatrice and the inevitable fear that must have overwhelmed and incapacitated her during the ravishing by her father. Thus, the reader has a sublime moment. Similar to Kant, for Burke, "no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too."[110] Burke's theory on the sublime reinforces that the reader is set up to have a sublime experience during this scene through being witness to the mental breakdown of Beatrice. Sublimity is the result because the mental breakdown played out overwhelms and sweeps away reality from the reader, subjecting him or her to the real pain that Beatrice feels; thus, resulting in an overpowering from fear which enables the transcendent state of the sublime.

The connection to Burke's theory of the sublime is reinforced because the reader is exposed to the real results of the terrible act: Beatrice's hurt mind, which was robbed "of all its powers of acting and reasoning" when her father raped

---

[109] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 84.

[110] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 135.

her.[111] This state lasts beyond the action because the fear and pain do not dissipate with the leaving of the father—but the anxiety and fear remains in what would come next both in the physical reality and after death. Beatrice did not know whether or father would attempt to debase her again which caused an immense apprehension, but more devastating and destructive was the fear of how this act, and Beatrice's involvement in it, would be judged by God and what that meant for her salvation.

Shelley is brilliant in his ability to create a scene that engulfs the reader with such emotional destruction. Longinus claimed that brilliance in writing elevates the reader to a sublime level—"Emotion is an essential part of sublimity" and Shelley capitalizes on his ability to inspire emotion in the reader.[112] Hyperbaton[113] is a way to express "a very real mark of urgent emotion" and it is thus "a means by which, in the best authors, imitation approaches the effect of nature."[114] Longinus explains that the speaker/author "often holds in suspense the meaning which he set out to convey…throws the hearer into a panic lest the sentence collapse all together, and forces him in his excitement to share the

[111] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830*, Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 135.

[112] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 147.

[113] "Hyperbaton is an arrangement of words or thoughts which differs from the normal sequence…It is a very real mark of urgent emotion." Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 146.

[114] *Ibid.*, 146.

speaker's peril."[115] Shelley uses the technique of hyperbaton throughout this scene: "I tied it fast. –O, Horrible," "as the world reels...My God," "about me…'tis substantial," "these dull eyes…upon this weary heart;" this scene contains numerous phrases that end with ellipses to describe Beatrice's attempts to convey what occurred while in a state of complete hysteria (III.i.8, 12, 18, 31). Through the disjointed speech full of pauses and breaks in thoughts, the reader is thrown back and forth, full of anxiety and apprehension about what will occur next. "Schiller draws the logical conclusion that *confusion* is the preeminent occasion of the sublime…not merely "the spiritual disorder of a natural landscape" but also "the uncertain anarchy of the moral world."[116] Thus, this scene fulfills Longinus' conclusion, which says, "the very audacity and hazardousness of the hyperbata add to the astounding affect."[117] The audience is left in awe, a terrifying awe, by what is experienced through the character of Beatrice.

In addition to hyperbaton, Longinus claims, "the choice of correct and magnificent words is a source of immense power to entice and charm the hearer."[118] The description of how Beatrice feels during this frantic state is a direct correlation to Shelley's desire to manipulate the emotions of the reader in

---

[115] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 146.

[116] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 35.

[117] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 146.

[118] *Ibid.*, 147.

an attempt to sweep up every mind and force it to join in the frenzied experience and thus to elevate to the sublime. Shelley's specific choice of graphic descriptions such as "putrefying limbs / shut round and sepulcher the panting soul," "a clinging, black, contaminating mist" that "creeps" and "glues" and "eats into my sinews" combined with the hyperbata evident in the diction as well as in the scene directions generates intense emotions in the reader of terrifying horror and fear of pain (III.i:26-27, 17, 16, 19, 21). These emotions therefore, according the explanations of Kant and Burke, generate the sublime.

Francesco Cenci was historically[119] and literarily a terrible person, responsible for numerous appalling crimes without ever being appropriately and justly punished. As Shelley shows in the first scene of the play, Cenci pays off the pope as reparation for his murderous deeds,

> *Camillo:* The matter of the murder is hushed up
> If you consent to yield his Holiness
> Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate
> …he said that you
> Bought perilous impunity with your gold. (I.i:1-3, 5-6)

In addition, the fellow families understand how evil he is; yet, they yielded to his power and refused to act on his shocking crimes. In the play when Cenci invites

[119] "A Manuscript was communicated to me during my Travels in Italy which was copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome and contains a detailed account of the horrors which ended in the extinction of one of the noblest and richest families of that city during the Pontificate of Clement VIII, in the year 1599. The story is that of an old man having spent his life in debauchery and wickedness, conceived at length and implacable hatred towards his children; which shewed itself towards one daughter under the form of an incestuous passion, aggravated by every circumstance of cruelty and violence." –from Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 140-41.

surrounding powerful families to a feast he toasts, to the shock of the guests, the death of two of his sons that he prayed to God would be taken care of,

God!

I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,

By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought.

My disobedient and rebellious sons

Are dead! (I.iii:40-44)

And, even the other powerful men would not dare to stand up to him

Camillo: A bitter wish for one so young and gentle;

Can we do nothing?

Colonna: Nothing that I see.

Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy:

Yet I would second any one. (I.iii:141-44)

Shelley spends a significant portion of the play enlightening the reader to the evil that is manifested in Cenci. We see a brave Beatrice stand up to him at the dinner feast, but she is quickly silenced. It is that act of defiance by Beatrice that sets in motion the abhorrent act by Cenci—the incestuous raping of his daughter.

Act four scene one is the first time that the reader encounters Cenci after the rape. The reader has already witnessed the devastating effects of the crime and is on edge, completely full of apprehension, when the scene begins. Cenci is awaiting the arrival of Beatrice and is full of frustration that she has not beckoned his call. As he waits, he voices aloud the ways in which he could force her to come to him,

Might I not drag her by the golden hair?

Stamp on her? Keep her sleepless till her brain

Be overworn? Tame her with chains and famine?

Less would suffice (IV.i:6-9).

There is not a hint of remorse in Cenci's speech and the actions he determines to inflict upon Beatrice are absolutely abhorrent. He is waiting for her to come so he can again ravish and rape her, and while planning on acting on such a unnatural deed, he contemplates what other despicable things he can put her through and "keep her sleepless till her brain / be overworn" (IV.i:7-8). This vile character is presented to the reader as completely evil, contemplating atrocious acts without any hesitation or resignation. During this scene, Cenci involves the character of Lucretia, his wife and Beatrice's step-mother, in his wicked plans by attempting to force her to bring Beatrice to him. She begs and pleads with him to "pity thy daughter" yet he responds, "Bid her come hither and before my mood / be changed, lest I drag her by the hair" (IV.i:21, 29-30).

The reader continues to experience this scene with a sense of foreboding and a growing fear of Cenci and what he plans to do next. Contributing to Cenci's demon-like demeanor is his absolute refusal to recognize that he has done wrong:

'Tis plain I have been favored from above,

For when I cursed my sons, they died—Aye…So…

As to the right or wrong that's talk…repentance

Repentance is an easy moment's work. (IV.i:39-42)

An actor is capable of nearly limitless evil if he does not acknowledge that his actions are wrong. There is no limitation to the amount of evil inflicted if the inflictor does not acknowledge any wrong in his actions. As the scene continues, the imagery produced by Cenci as he plans how to ruin Beatrice's life, becomes more and more frightening and disturbing. He claims that "if there be skill in hate" which is clearly displayed by Cenci, that Beatrice will "die in despair" (IV.i:49, 50). Cenci is preparing the evil acts that he wishes to inflict upon his own flesh, "thou hast made my daughter; this my blood, / this particle of my divided being; / or Rather, this my bane and my disease" (IV.i:116-118). He holds not love or affection for Beatrice, rather only hate and repugnance. He says that he will "drag her step by step / Thro' infamies unheard of among men" (IV.i:80-81). He calculates ways to destroy his daughter to the awe of the audience. He is a creature so full of hate that his actions are unimaginable; and the audience waits in dread for Beatrice to arrive. Cenci goes beyond wanting to inflict pain and punish his daughter for standing up to him—he literally wants to see her destroyed to death and even with death, his destruction will not be complete: "A rebel to her father and to her God. / Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds; / Her name shall be the terror of the earth" (IV.i:90-92). He plans to make her "body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin" (IV.i:95). The reader has already been witness to the onset of this destruction through experiencing, alongside Beatrice, the hysteric aftermath of the rape.

The last vivid image of Cenci's calculated deeds is by far the most terror-filled and disturbing as he expresses his desire to be "fruitful in her" and

"encrease/ and multiply" because it will fulfill his own "imprecation" by not only ruining her but all aspects of her life beyond his own (IV.i:143, 143-44, 145). His evil and punishment would live with her so that "she may see / her image mixed with what she abhors, / smiling upon her from her nursing breast" (IV.i:147-49). Cenci has already gone against the law of nature and God by raping his own daughter, but that all is not evil enough, not devastating enough—he wishes and needs—to act again and destroy all laws of nature by hoping to impregnate his daughter so he can continue to haunt and punish her after his death. Beyond Cenci's horrific desire, he becomes even more terrifying when he acknowledges the unnatural actions he desires to commit: "What may else be more unnatural" (IV.i:155).

Shelley plunges the reader into a chasm of disturbing images that culminates with Cenci's own acknowledgement that he is "but like a fiend" rather than a man who is overcome with a "giddy sickness of strange awe; / [his] heart is beating with an expectation / of horrid joy" (IV.i:161, 165-67). As discomforting and frightful as the scene is for the reader to witness, Shelley's ability to produce a character whose evil flows off the written page and penetrates the mind of the reader is masterful as it sets up the reader to witness a terror and imagine a fear so threatening that it incites the sublime. As Burke claims, "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger…whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects…is a source of the sublime, that it is productive

of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."[120] Monk adds, "the keystone of Burke's aesthetic is emotion and the emotion, and the foundation of his theory of sublimity is the emotion of terror."[121] Image after image created by Cenci, through Shelley, can be considered as exciting the emotions of pain and danger—as well as creating terror. Whether it be his desire to "poison and corrupt her soul" or his solicitation to Earth and God to "Let her food be / poison, until she be encrusted round / with leprous stains," every aspect of this scene "excite[s] the ideas of pain and danger." (IV.i:128-30).[122] Cenci is planning his destruction of Beatrice while attempting to include Lucretia in the overall scene, and acknowledging his own feelings of being more demon than man is a lot of evil for the reader to be exposed to.

This is added to the fact that Cenci feels no sense of remorse and is incredibly powerful, fearing nothing, not even the Church. In the preface of the play Shelley says,

> Religion in Italy is not, as in protestant countries, a cloak to be worn on particular days…It is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct. It has no necessary connexion

[120] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 134.

[121] Samuel Monk, "The Sublime: Burke's *Enquiry*," *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism,* Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 27.

[122] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 134.

> with any one virtue. The most atrocious villain may be rigidly devout, and without any shock to the established faith, confess himself to be so.[123]

Cenci is the perfect example of Shelley's explanation of Italian Catholics and, therefore, it becomes much easier to understand the fear that Cenci generates when, according to belief, he can so easily be forgiven for his misdeeds. Burke continues in his inquiry into the sublime in the section on power. He states that he knows "of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power…so that strength, violence, pain, and terror are ideas that rush in upon the mind together."[124] Cenci is all of those, strong, violent, pain-inflicting, and full of terror—Shelley's character produces a swarm of emotion that when mixed together, create this fear—one that inspires the sublime. Monk says for Burke, "any object that threatens danger to man may produce the sublime."[125] The reader is clearly not in the line of threat of Cenci, but this by no means changes the effect of the emotions that the scene generates within the mind. Kant informs that a violence powerful enough to

> make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power…but the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly

---

[123] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 143.

[124] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830,* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996) 135.

[125] Samuel Monk, "The Sublime: Burke's *Enquiry*," *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism,* Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 33.

call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind.[126]

Shelley, through vivid description and unique, emotion-inspiring language, creates sublime characters, awe-inspiring and terrifying; powerful enough to incite a sublime transcendence within the minds of the reader. As Longinus describes in his essay, "strong and inspired emotion" is a source of sublimity.[127] Shelley's Cenci rouses incredible emotions in the reader and through that, elevates them. In addition to "strong and inspired emotion," Longinus finds that noble diction is also a source of the sublime. Specifically, choice words and use of metaphors contributes to the creation of sublimity.[128] Descriptive language such as "This devil / Which sprung from me as from a hell, was meant / To aught good use," and

Heaven, rain upon her head
The blistering drops of Maremma's dew,
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs
To loathed lameness. (IV.i:130-34)

[126] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 438.

[127] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 138.

[128] *Ibid.,* 138.

is full of flawlessly chosen diction to create disturbing and terrifying images that reinforce the terror of the fully evil character of Cenci (IV.i:119-21). "Strong and appropriate emotions and genuine sublimity are a specific palliative for multiplied or daring metaphors because their nature is to sweep and drive all these other things along with the surging tide of their movement," and as Longinus describes, the "daring metaphors" of Shelly sweep the reader away with provoked emotions to a sublimity that palliates it all by elevating the mind.[129]

Shelley, according to the requirements that Longinus lays out, has created a character, through a mastery of language that fulfills the distinctions of Kant and Burke as full of violence and terror, exciting the idea of pain that inspires the sublime. Additionally, through witnessing the hysteria and craze that took over Beatrice after having endured the atrocious act of rape by her father, Shelley incites the sublime through the utter fear that is displayed in her character and thus transferred to the audience. Through well-chosen diction and the precise composition of terrifying images, Shelley fashioned characters and scenes in a play that bring the mind of the reader to a level beyond a traditional capacity and elevates the "strength of our soul."[130] For Longinus,

> when we come to great geniuses in literature—where; by contrast, grandeurs is not divorced from service and utility—we have to conclude that such men, for all their faults, tower above mortal stature. Other

[129] Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010),148.

[130] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 438.

> literary qualities prove their uses to be human; sublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of God.[131]

Shelley has shown through his brilliant mastery of language to be one of these "literary geniuses" that Longinus alludes to.

Shelley has proved to be dazzling in bringing the power of the sublime experience in nature to the inspiration of the reader through a poem such as "Mont Blanc" but now, through this examination of *The Cenci*, we see that Shelley has captured the power of language to the extent of being able to produce the sublime—"the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."[132] Through *The Cenci*, he has equaled nature in power arousing passions of "the great power of the sublime…that hurries us on by an irresistible force."[133]

[131]Longinus, "from *On Sublimity*," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 151.

[132] Edmund Burke, "from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," *British Literature 1780-1830*, Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 134.

[133] *Ibid.*, 135.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The power of Shelley as a writer in *The Cenci* is at its highest; he is most powerful as he becomes like nature inspiring the sublime in the reader. The idea that a person can be like nature, all-powerful enough to evoke the sublime, is somewhat problematic and radical. However, for Shelley it is absolutely fitting. The conventional usage of the sublime and transcendent experience for the romantics referenced the power of the divine as participatory in that experience. As seen in the analysis of "Mont Blanc," Shelley pushes against this tradition by focusing on the power of nature and the instigation of nature in that which is sublime and transcendent rather than it being a function of the divine.

Using terms more associated with the occult than the divine was a radical atheistic slap to those earlier romantics who grounded their transcendence and sublime experience as one with the divine. Writing in the high language of the sublime and using the same rhetorical techniques to produce that sublime in the writing of "Mont Blanc" and still not referencing the divine was a profound move forward in terms of what the sublime was for Shelley and the later romantic writers. And going even further than that was the use of the sublime in *The Cenci*, he successfully completely removes any hint of the need for the divine in a powerful sublime experience that is inspired in the reader. And he is utterly successful in evoking the sublime through the power of language and the rhetorical aspect of the sublime that was a significant, but almost ignored, aspect of the theories of the sublime that the earlier generation romantics embraced.

Longinus, Kant, and Burke are anything but radical, yet so quickly the focus of their philosophies on the sublime became rooted in nature and the natural landscape. And thus, the power of the interior sublime, the sublime of the mind, which is actually so much of a focus in their philosophies, was to an extent pushed aside.

Shelley brings to life this dark sublime, a sublime rooted in terror and fear and the inability to escape it as it exists in the interior of one's mind. The power of this dark and disturbing sublime is so clear, yet surprising when one realizes that Shelley wrote *The Cenci* in between acts three and four of *Prometheus Unbound.*[134] *Prometheus Unbound,* especially in the last act, can easily be called one of Shelley's most positive and idealistic poetic expressions. The mythical ideal is beautifully presented in *Prometheus Unbound*, but it appears clearly to be too idealistic and too beautiful and too problematic for Shelley as he is led to write such a sublimely horrific, disturbing, and more importantly, historical drama on the sad realities of life that is portrayed in *The Cenci.*

[134] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface," *Prometheus Unbound, Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 204.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. “Poetics.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. 90-117.

"Awful, adj.". OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press. 5 April 2011 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13943?redirectedFrom=awful>.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1757.

Burke, Edmund. “from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.” British Literature 1780-1830.* Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996. 134-40.

Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni.” *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Other Poems.* New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1895. 66-69.

Cox, Jeffrey. *In the Shadows of Romance.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987.

Curran, Stuart. “Shelleyan Drama.” *The Romantic Theater*. Richard Allen Cave, ed. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe/Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1986. 61-78.

Endo, Paul. “The Cenci: Recognizing The Shelleyan Sublime,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 38(4), 1996. 379-97.

Ferguson, Frances. “Shelley’s *Mont Blanc:* What the Mountains Said.” *Romanticism and Language,* ed. Arden Reed. London: Methuen, 1984.

Ferguson, Frances. *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individualism.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

Kant, Immanuel. “Critique of the Power of Judgment.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. 399-419.

Leighton, Angela. *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Longinus. “from *On Sublimity*.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* Vincent B. Leitch, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. 135-155.

Monk, Samuel. *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960.

Monk, Samuel. “The Sublime: Burke’s *Enquiry*.” *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism.* Harold Bloom, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970. 24-41.

Poulet, Georges. “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority.” *Reader-Response Criticism,* Jean Tompkins, ed. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. 41-49.

Richardson, Alan. *A Mental Theater*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1955.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “Preface.” *Prometheus Unbound. Shelley’s Poetry and Prose.* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. 207-09.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Cenci. Shelley’s Poetry and Prose.* Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 2 vols.* ed. Frederick L. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Wordsworth, William. “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798.” *British Literature 1780-1830.* Anne K, Mellor and Richard E. Matlak, ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prose of William Wordsworth, 3 vols.* Ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.