

In his discussion of the 1799 and 1805 versions of *The Prelude* Benis deals with the issue of Wordsworth's growing conservatism, the latter poem being read as part of an agenda of important 'self-fashioning'. Benis argues that the poet of the 1799 *Prelude* presents himself 'as what we might be tempted to call a juvenile delinquent' (p. 19), focusing particularly on such youthful transgressions as poaching in relation to the harsh game laws of the period. The legal and social ambiguity of such acts continues Wordsworth's advocacy of a position of marginality throughout the 1790s, and this is contrasted against *The Prelude* of 1805 in which the poet 'abandons any sign of ambiguity in his political allegiance' (p. 20). Such transgressions, as well as his early republicanism, are now presented as 'mistakes', as juvenile misdemeanours, and his representations of the homeless in 1805 are 'cleansed of all ambiguous potential' (p. 20). Wordsworth's domestic stability at Grasmere, in contrast to his perpetual wanderings of the 1790s, is accompanied with a growing distance from vagrant life as the poet consciously attempts to establish himself as a respectable member of British society.

*Romanticism on the Road* is a radical reappraisal of Wordsworth's life, poetry and political inclinations. Its argument is compelling and fascinating throughout, at once highly readable and deeply engaging. Benis turns away from Kenneth Johnston's representation of Wordsworth as a Byronic hero and instead presents, in his own words, 'a cautious, ambivalent and even confused human being' (p. 23).

Stephen Burley

*Shelley & Revolutionary Ireland*. By Paul O'Brien (Dublin & London: Redwords, 2002), 327 pp. ISBN 1 872208 19 3 (paperback) / 1 872208 20 7 (hardback). £11.00.

*The Making of the Poets: Byron and Shelley in their Time*. By Ian Gilmour. (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002), xiii + 402 pp. ISBN 0 7011 7110 3 (hardback). £20.00.

Paul O'Brien's *Shelley on Revolutionary Ireland* promises to be a useful addition to Shelleyan scholarship as the first full-length account of the poet's activities during his two visits therein 1812 and 1813. Whilst Percy Shelley's political activities are all too often dismissed as the naïve enthusiasm of a youthful dilettante, O'Brien presents a convincing case for these episodes to be regarded as perhaps his most serious forays into the arena of national politics. As the title rather suggests, this book is very much in the same vein as Paul Foot's *Red Shelley* (1980), and indeed Foot contributes a preface for O'Brien's work.

Shelley's involvement in the hotbed of Irish nationalism and his espousal of such causes as Catholic Emancipation is examined closely, conveying a vivid sense of a desire for reform. The detailed accounts of his attendance at political meetings, his speeches and pamphleteering, contemporary newspaper reports, and the attention paid to such activities by the Home Office creates a strong impression of an activist who was taken seriously by the British authorities, if no one else.

But Shelley's visits also coincided with a key period in the history of Irish literature. The Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy's control of the country's 'official' cultural

life in Dublin had subdued artistic innovation and prolonged the neo-classical influence. In Chapter 8, O'Brien provides a well-observed account of Shelley's small but significant role in the gradual emergence of a Romantic influence in Irish culture, and its subsequent absorption into the country's literary tradition. O'Brien also presents a case for Denis Florence McCarthy, author of *Shelley's Early Life* (1872), as a key figure in the early recognition of Shelley as a political writer, who 'laid the foundation for modern interpretations of Shelley's early life and politics' (p. 155).

As might perhaps be expected, O'Brien concentrates on the ideological and biographical aspects of the poet's life, within a strong historical context. There is little in the way of canonical literary criticism here, though Chapter 9 uses a purely political theme to investigate the progress of Shelley's reputation after his death. O'Brien adds his voice to criticism of the process of censorship during the nineteenth century that led to dozens of editions of 'selected works' appearing without *Queen Mab*, *The Mask of Anarchy*, or *The Revolt of Islam*. Later critics of Shelley's work such as F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, and Stephen Spender are also taken to task, whilst we are also provided with a fascinating 'insider' view of the political left's continuing sympathy for Shelley's poetry during the twentieth century.

This well-researched book is supplemented by notes and extensive appendices, supplying relevant excerpts from Shelley's poetry, correspondence, and political writings relating to Ireland. But perhaps the most important quality of this particular work is its Irish perspective, which provides a refreshing contextual outlook in an area dominated by the views of Anglo-American scholarship.

Though not overtly political in character, Ian Gilmour's *The Making of the Poets* is laced with all of the ideological bias one might expect from a former Conservative cabinet minister. This joint biography of the early lives of Byron and Shelley sets out to demonstrate that the two men, who became 'close friends and kindred spirits', actually had 'far more in common than is usually recognised'. Unfortunately, Gilmour adds little to what is already known about either, as individuals or as friends. He manages to draw only the broadest of parallels to link their respective upbringings, with the structure of the book highlighting the fact that both went from genteel family homes to prep school, public school, and then Oxbridge, and little more of real relevance than that.

However, it is in the detail of the author's analysis and assessment of the two poets' lives and work that this book most exposes itself to criticism. There is very little, if anything, in the way of original research here, with the chapter notes bearing witness to the author's constant dependence upon regurgitating the work of earlier biographers and commentators. One way in which Gilmour does make his presence known is through his inability to resist the temptation to intrude upon his commentary by littering it with opinionated, patronising, and judgmental prejudice. The dismissal of Percy Shelley's younger brother as 'a buffoonish nonentity' (p. 44) is typical, with neither any basis for this comment, nor even a name for the boy (he was called John), being provided. But other such instances are even more jarring, making it difficult to accept this book as a work of scholarship.



Gilmour's account of the early stages of Shelley's relationship with William Godwin are a case in point. After first identifying *Political Justice* as a work that had more influence on Shelley 'than any other book he ever read', Gilmour then dismisses it as a 'farrago of Godwinian absurdities . . . where reality seldom intruded' (p. 299). On the same page, Gilmour rivals F. R. Leavis in his high-handed (and again unsupported) criticism of Shelley's 'addiction to abstract ideas and his reluctance to accept the real world'. On the following page, Godwin is boorishly described as 'a persistent and brazen sponger'.

Regrettably, the author's bombastic disapprobation is not limited to character assassination. His occasional forays into the field of literary criticism betray a lamentably myopic and philistine view. Shelley's observations on 'cold charity's unwelcome dole' in his poem *A Tale of Society as it is: From Facts, 1811*, are taken to task for giving an inaccurate representation of England's Poor Law, which we are told was 'much admired by foreign visitors' (p. 301). Confidence in Gilmour's knowledge of the Shelley canon is also rather undermined by his reference to *Queen Mab* as 'his first mature long poem' (p. 299). This is a strange description for a work only recently resituated by critical opinion from the status of 'juvenilia' to that of 'early' — notwithstanding Gilmour's own condemnation of it as being 'Godwinian'.

This is far from being the 'incisive and compelling' book proclaimed on the inside cover. Indeed, given the author's obvious antipathy the one of his subjects' ideological beliefs, one wonders why he chose to include Shelley at all.

Christopher Goulding

*Byron and Romanticism, Essays of Jerome McGann.* Edited by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). £47.50 hard cover, £17.95 paperback.

*Mary Shelley's Fictions, From Frankenstein to Falkner.* Edited by Michael Eberle Sinatra (Macmillan, 2000). £40.00 hard cover.

*Mary Shelley in Her Times.* Edited by Betty T. Bennett & Stuart Curran (John Hopkins University Press, 2000). £33.00 hard cover.

The fifty or so essays in these three collections constitute a broad selection of Byron and Mary Shelley studies at the millennium. Jerome McGann's is a gathering of quarter of a century's musings about the poet, unconnected with bicentenary business, but the two books on Mary Shelley are the fruits of international colloquia, *Mary Shelley in Her Times* being the contributions made at the bicentenary conference arranged by the Keats-Shelley Association of America, and dedicated most suitably to its President and his wife, whose joint enthusiasm made it possible for among the most illustrious Shelley scholars on both sides of the Atlantic to present papers. The collection edited by Michael Eberle Sinatra has more modest and, as a result, more eclectic purposes, being a selection from conferences arranged during the bicentenary year in Britain, Canada and the USA.

McGann's book carries a cover portrait, once thought to be by Géricault, of a swarthy man in shadow, forefinger to temple, a surprisingly modern face, more like the chairman of an international conglomerate than the poet he was supposed to represent. Had it been of McGann, one would not have been surprised, as the essays do represent a power of cerebration, a resolve to transfix that promethean butterfly upon a suitable board, wings secured by strips of paper before it goes into the display cabinet. Some of them are almost autobiographical, when the author reveals his approach to Byron, on whose work he has exercised a lifetime's editing skills. To most readers, Byron is a public figure of absorbing, sometimes titillating interest, a historical phenomenon. A vast new biography by Fiona MacCarthy has recently explored aspects of Byron's personality about which there will always be dispute. His brief adult life, lasting less than the first quarter of the nineteenth century, he recorded in letters and journals of scintillating verve and humour, his poetry, that which is still widely read, namely *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*, complement the *roman fleuve* of his life. We have not seen the last of the Lives. But they have not always been accompanied, in Victorian fashion, by the Works.

McGann's achievement has been to bring the Works into central consideration. For those who read Byron as the anti-heroic hero, the Napoleonic antithesis, the social jester, McGann sees a nihilist, whom Baudelaire and Nietzsche clasped to their bosoms. His mordant satire, alien to his fellow radicals, Wordsworth and Tennyson, exposed the societal system of the day as dysfunctional, whose chief citizen was Villainton. As a society it was neither idealist nor optimistic, which reaction must always be. His was not the sort of social critique that, McGann remarks mordantly, would be popular with the presidential campaign of George W. Bush or of the Regan years. The 'dialogue essays' which constitute the second part of the collection are discussions or interviews with McGann in discursive mood. But behind the portentous cloak of words and definitions, neither Byron nor Romanticism have been secured with a pin. Such would not have been McGann's purpose, but only too often the shafts of light are occluded by the portentousness of obscurity. Mystification is, too often, the, no doubt, unintended result of contemporary criticism.

The two collections on Mary Shelley (known throughout as Shelley, which seems to me perverse — cannot husband and wife bear their first names or initials?) are more accessible. In Norah Crook's lucid introduction to the essays on her fictions, Mary's appeal to us is in her striking and intellectual versatility. As a novelist she is not in the top class, in fact she may not be in any class at all, but, as Crook quotes Betty Bennett, her novels 'dwell on questions of power, responsibility and love'. But if they are romances at all, they are *romans à thèse*, read less for pleasure than for revelation. Indeed they are hard to read at all; for her later novels are not easy to find. Oxford's World Classics have allowed *Valperga* and *The Last Man* to go out of print, while Penguins have retained *Matilda*. Original and sometimes surprising as they all are, their style and uncompromisingly feminine treatment look superficially like Lady Bracknell's description of Miss Prism's 'three volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality'.