

It seems to me that the question of humanism, the human and the inhuman has undergone a certain resurgence in recent years. On the one side you have thinkers such as Edward Said defending humanism as a sort of pragmatic manoeuvre that can restore agency to the denuded human subject—such a position is not blind to the lessons of recent history, but maintains, as Said argues in his posthumous *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, that “it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (10). On the other side you have thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek advocating a radical turn to the *inhuman*, arguing that identifying ourselves as “only human” puts us on a slippery slope that exonerates Nazi war criminals: he was only human, and he felt bad for what he did. Certainly these two responses arise from post-structuralism’s radical problematizing of Man, human rights, *Dasein*, the human sciences, anthropocentrism, or even the nature and goals of Humanities Departments. R. Radhakrishnan, that master of questions, puts it eloquently in his new book: “The centrism question is intimately related to the theme of the human, of humanism in general. Is humanism thinkable except as an expression of one centrism or the other? Is it possible to access human ontology despite and beyond the imbalances of a world structured by dominances?” The rejoinder to post-structuralism’s endless discursion is perhaps nowhere better articulated than by the contemporary American novelist David Foster Wallace—an articulation Shelley would likely agree with: “Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize that we *are* still human beings. Or can be” (131). This back-stepping from the *are still human* to the *or can be*, from the human as positive category to the human as ethical possibility, is a move Shelley constantly enacts, and it’s what I shall focus on in this talk. Specifically I shall outline—tentatively—a way to use Foucault’s notion of

problematization that can help us make sense of Shelley's apparent ambivalence. Two hundred years ago Shelley, the Romantic most engaged in the scientific discourses of the day, himself makes a move away from the discourses of "The Human Sciences" then developing to a poetic, political and philosophical articulation of ethical problematization.

Shelley never had to deal with the discursive pressures and interdictions of post-structuralism, and yet we see within Shelley's thought a persistent skepticism toward the category of the human, and an odd sort of tongue-biting with the word itself. Shelley's taste for the question mark, retraction, self-reflection, the understated or overstated pun (think of the titles *Adonais* or *Epipsychidion*) and his *distaste* for resolution, finality, and the monocular leave him at odds with traditional or Enlightenment humanism. Shelley's contemporaries chided him for his "shr[inking] instinctively from portraying the human passions," foremost among his critics being his wife Mary, to whom he dedicated *The Witch of Atlas*: "To Mary," he wrote, adding the parenthetical: "(On her objecting to the following poem, upon the score of its containing no human interest)." The poem's first stanza gives us an excuse for this lack of "human interest," arguing: "How, my dear Mary,—are you critic-bitten / (For vipers kill, though dead) by some review, / That you condemn these verses I have written, / Because they tell no story, false or true? / What, though no mice are caught by a young kitten, / May it not leap and play as grown cats do, / Till its claws come?" (1-7). The implication here is that a poem of true "human interest" would entail the cat catching the mouse (and the dead viper-critic catching the reader). Shelley's tone starts off as entirely ironic, but quickly moves into another register in the stanza that follows: "What hand would crush the silken-winged fly, / The youngest of inconstant April's minions, / Because it cannot climb the purest sky... // Not thine. Thou knowest 'tis its doom to die" (9-11, 13). Stories of injunctive "human interest" tend to end like Kafka's "A Little Fable," wherein a mouse's world keeps shrinking until it cries out: "'these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner lies the trap that I must run into.' 'You need only change your direction,' said the cat, and ate it up." In each of these cases

the human is figured in the entrapped animal: fate's claws catching the mouse; the Icarian fly incapable of reaching heaven and swatted down by an invisible hand; the double bind of the shrinking world's trap and the all-knowing cat who eats you up at the moment he gives you a way out. The human, or rather what humans are interested in, Shelley mockingly concludes, is this foreclosure of possibility, this foreshortening of sky, this "shrinking" of worlds and human passion. This is why outside of *The Witch of Atlas*' ironic context the term *human* in Shelley's writing takes on a precisely opposite meaning: *human*, almost always used adjectively, connotes a certain expansion of possibility that can only occur at the moment that the human is realized as finite, as dissociated from the transcendental. Rather, it's more like a simultaneous expansion and contraction, where the realization of human finitude actually expands the human... in another direction. Like Kafka's mouse, the way out appears exactly when the world becomes finite: "you need only change your direction."

In Foucauldian terms this expansion / contraction can only happen through problematizing the very notion of the human, through subjecting it to rigorous questioning and juxtaposing it with both the radically inhuman (like the Lucretian void of Mont Blanc's peaks) and the dogmatic slumbers of transcendentalism (such as the narcissistic visions of the Alastor, the quote unquote Spirit of Solitude). Shelley as it were changes his discursive direction, moving from the exhausting and endless questions of epistemology to the endless and more nutritive work of problematizing the ethical.

Perhaps Shelley's most famous—and vexing—question mark is the one that ends his 1816 "Mont Blanc." The mark follows a skeptical question which many have taken to be a radical ethical injunction: "And what were thou and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-4). Although this skeptical query is grammatically posed to Mont Blanc itself (whose uncharted summits are the hypothetical "silence and solitude" referred to in the ultimate line), the ethical injunction seems somehow aimed at us, the readers of the poem in possession of "human" minds and imaginations.

Shelley's *what* turns from a question into a demand because it addresses our minds, as it were, directly—it opens a gap in our understanding and imagination that we are compelled, impossibly and on account of the phrase's self-reflexivity, to fill. That is, we *must* imagine “vacancy,” that which possesses no trace of the human. The human here becomes a sort of negatively defined remainder or failure.

So we have on the one hand Shelley's frequent and enthusiastic use of the adjectival term *human*, and, on the other, his imperative to confront the radically *inhuman*, specifically that chaotic and iterative Lucretian void (whether that be the externalized “vacancy” of the silence and solitude, or the “chasm of an insufficient void” “within our own thoughts,” as he explains in his essay “On Love”). Given Shelley's professed skepticism and the omnipresence of these voids and vacancies within his writings, critics have typically taken Shelley to be a critic, *durant la lettre*, of what Foucault would call the “classical” regimes of knowledge that positively determine “the nature of man.” In *The Order of Things* Foucault describes this Enlightenment system of speciation in which the dictum that “there must be continuity in nature” is not a “purely negative requirement (no blank spaces between categories), but a positive requirement” where “all nature forms one great fabric” (146). Shelley's nature, meanwhile, is as full of holes as our knowledge of it. This in spite of the fact that Foucault declares that in Shelley's time “man became that upon the basis of which all knowledge could be could be constituted as immediate and non-problematized evidence; he became, *a fortiori*, that which justified the calling into question of all knowledge of man” (345). Shelley doesn't call into question the “knowledge of man” so much as he problematizes the thing itself. In Shelley's hands Man recedes and leaves in his wake *human sympathy, the human mind, human love, human charity, human wants needs hearts hands and steps*, and, the weird and frequent locution *human things*. In this litany of descriptions the hitherto privileged pairing *human being* turns into merely one among many, a sort of vague possibility rather than the anchor of “all knowledge.”

And yet, in and amongst all of his attacks on such positive regimes of knowledge, Shelley uses the term *human* time and again, particularly in his work between 1815 and 1817, roughly from *Alastor* to *The Revolt of Islam*—(my hasty word searches turn up 16 and 81 times, respectively). While it is true that—in a typically Shelleyean move—Shelley almost always distances himself from the term by turning it from a noun into an adjective, the unrelenting use of the word does seem to create what looks like a positive category of knowledge in which some things are human and other things are clearly not. How can we account for this incongruity between Shelley’s radical skepticism with respect to systems of positive knowledge and his apparent enthusiasm for a particular and culturally-laden category of positive knowledge (the *human*)? Is it merely a rhetorical flourish pleading with us to empathize with other human beings (hint: it is)? Or is something else going on?

Hint: something else *is* going on and it is, I think, a fruitful entryway into Shelley’s larger project: that is, Foucault’s notion of *ethical problematization*. Problematization is, above all, a “work of thought” (119) that is directly linked to action and practices of the self. And thought, for the late Foucault, “is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem” (119). Problematization doesn’t exactly *create* ethical or epistemological problems so much as redefine and modify problems that already exist and come from (in Foucault’s words) “social, economic, or political processes” (119). Problems that, in other words, are *historically determined*. In this way I think Foucault’s notion of problematization is fruitful for examining not just Shelley’s ethico-political project, but

for examining Romanticism and the Romantic Age more universally.¹ This, indeed, is one of the goals of my dissertation.

To return to Shelley we can say that his use of the category of the *human* can be read as having ethical rather than strictly epistemological goals—indeed, under this conception what is deemed knowable is determined in relation to a particular ethical problem. In Shelley’s time—that is, during the birth of the so-called “human sciences”—I would tentatively posit that a central point of ethical problematization is something along the lines of Kant’s so-called fourth question: *Was ist der Mensch* (*what is, roughly translated, a human being*)?² (This is, by the way, the most “questionable” of the four and creates the possibility of the other three and which is posed only in his lectures on logic). I believe that Shelley would say that this is not at core an epistemological problem (like, say, Kant’s first question: *what can I know?*). It’s an ethical one that can only be answered in those terms. It is inextricably related to others sorts of problems—in Foucault’s terms the human as element in a system of knowledge, the human as node in a regime of power—but it is primarily an *ethical* problem. For Shelley the *human* becomes something that is created only in ethical crisis—*human* becomes a modifier, more like a verb than a noun. We see this when, for example, the *Alastor* Poet’s “wasted human form” “spurns” the “choicest gifts” of “human love” and the “human charity” of the exotic cottagers and the Arab Maiden; or when the “human mind” confronts the horrors of “vacancy” in “Mont Blanc”; or when Laon and Cythna are confronted with war and famine and brute power and learn that they share “one human heart” (3361)). For Shelley, it is only (or at least typically) through such a confrontation with the utterly inhuman that the human becomes possible as both an ethical and a political category. Individuals “blunted by reiteration” are not necessarily human, at all times, but they can be.

¹ Possible Q: so how is this different from another sort of historicism? A: Well, it may ultimately not be that different, but this method gives us an easy tool to read the Romantics’ historical situation through their philosophical commitments, which are extreme. So for example, solipsism...

² Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Logic*. Tr. and ed. J. Michael Young (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1992), 538.

And yet in some moments Shelley does seem to treat the human as though it were not only a positive category, but simply common sense, as in his letter to Ollier, his publisher: “The whole story [of his 1817 *Revolt of Islam*], with the exception of the first canto and part of the last is a mere human story without the smallest intermixture of supernatural interference... I have attempted in the progress of my work to speak to the common elementary emotions of the human heart, so that though it is the story of violence and revolution [and snakes with revolving eyeballs that “commingle into one”!], it is relieved by milder pictures of friendship and love and natural affections.” Whether or not this description of Shelley’s baffling political epic as a “mere human story” is simply buttering up a publisher so that he’ll print a poem about incest, we can see that even here the human is defined in opposition to “violence and revolution.” It “relieves” it, places it “in relief.”

We don’t have the space here to trace a genealogy of Shelley’s use of the term human all the way to *The Revolt* (much less throughout his career), so we’ll limit ourselves to a case study of his 1816 *Alastor*. The prime irony of *Alastor* is that the wandering and knowledge-questing Poet chooses the love of an Orientalized, and thereby *imagined* and *solipsistic*, Vision over the “human love” of the actual Arab maiden who, like the cottagers later in the poem, “ministered with human charity / His human wants” (255-6). That word (*human*), recurs throughout the text at many of its key moments: the “human sympathy” of the preface; after his death “No human hands” (51) tend to the Poet’s “untimely tomb” (50). It is perhaps once he finally forsakes his “human wants”—and the “human charity” and “choicest gifts” (205) of “The sweet spirit of human love” (202)—that the Unreliable Wordsworthian Narrator believes the Poet finally surpasses “the human”: “Safely fled— / As if that frail and wasted human form, / Had been an elemental god.” We must pay close attention, however, to the particularly Shelleyan “as if”—the hyperbolic edifice crashes when we take another look at this feeble support, and from that point on the use of the word “human” begins taking on a more tragic resonance.

The moral played out in the poem's tragedy is laid out clearly and early in the Preface (this is a long rant): "They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead.... Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt." There seem to be two targets of this extended moralizing, the first being the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* (which came out a year before *Alastor*, and which Mary and Percy mutually despised), and the second being that which makes the Poet of *Alastor* in some sense a tragic hero: that is, his inability to resist affixing a "single image" to "the intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense [that] have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings" (Preface). That is, the *Alastor* Poet reduces a multiplicity to a singularity by "uniting" the demands of human sympathy and "affixing them to [the] single image" of his beloved Ideal while ignoring a) the existence of "other human beings," and b) the requisitions' dependence on human beings; and less emphatically c) the unstable epistemological grounds of his whole endeavor. The Poet's beloved image (literally the Alastor and the Spirit of Solitude) becomes an object of knowledge at precisely the moment that it (and the Poet) leaves the human community. For Shelley such a reduction is always, inevitably a result of or tendency toward solipsism and that solitude to which both duty and dereliction press us. This inevitability is why the paradox of Love is perhaps the fundamental problem in Shelley's poetry. Love, for Shelley, constantly runs the risk of becoming the Name of a false unity at the same time that it gestures beyond the "dark idolatry of the self," as Cythna calls it in *The Revolt of Islam* (L&C, VIII.xxii). Love always risks simply loving itself at the same time that it aims at what seems to be a universally human impulse that

might evade irony and skepticism and found a positive ethico-political program. The term *love* is something like Shelley's version of Pandora's box—a word he would have us work to empty of all significance save hope.

But again, this cannot be a transcendental hope—it must be human and finite, and this is precisely what leads to the *Alastor* Poet's downfall. After “his wasted human form” (350) is moved across a sea in a small boat “beyond all human speed” (361) in search of “the fountains of knowledge” (Preface), the Poet encounters, at long last, what he had been anticipating: “His eyes beheld / Their own wan light through the reflected lines / Of his thin hair, distinct in their dark depth / Of that still fountain; as the human heart, / Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave, / Sees its own treacherous likeness there (469-474).” As Reiman and Fraistat point out in a footnote to the poem, this glade is likely located in the Caucasus Mountains, smack in the middle of South Ossetia, and which was once believed by ethnographers such as Georges Buffon to be “the cradle of the human race.”³ In tracing the origin of humanity back to this point, Shelley is likely making ironic reference to the thought of these so-called “rational monogenists,” who recognized “but one human species, [and] saw the human races as varieties arising from the influence of environmental factors such as climate.” Although it is difficult to determine to what extent Shelley really is ironizing their thought, which often tried to make concessions to the bible, it is clear that Shelley and the monogenists shared at least one common belief: that the human race is above all *singular. Or can be*. Perhaps we should say that Shelley the skeptic at least shared the belief that the human race is not clearly divided among pre-ordained hierarchical lines, that “the human” is, as it were, a universal category that, even if it can only be defined negatively, is stable enough to found both an ethics and a politics. Or the hope of one.

But back to the narcissistic glade in the Caucasus that we are told holds the secrets to the origin of the human race. “One step, / One human step alone,” the Narrator tells us, “has ever

³ This is from an article by the anthropologist John Haller entitled “The Species Problem: Nineteenth-Century Concepts of Racial Inferiority in the Origin of Man Controversy.”³Cf. Note 8 on p. 80 of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.

broken / The stillness of its solitude; one voice / Alone inspired its echoes;--even that voice /
Which hither came, floating among the winds, / And led the loveliest among human forms / To
make their wild haunts the depository / Of all the grace and beauty that ended / Its motions”
(588-97). Shelley here presents us with something of a tongue in cheek paradox: if this were
truly the cradle of the human race, how exactly could the Poet’s step have been the first to have
“broken / The stillness of its solitude”? The Poet’s death “leaves / Those who remain behind, not
sobs or groans, / The passionate tumult of a clinging hope; / But pale despair and cold
tranquillity, / Nature’s vast frame, the web of human things, / Birth and the grave, that are not as
they were” (714-720). The tremendous irony is that *everything* is exactly as it was—the Poet’s
song is “locked within [Silence’s] rugged cells,” and all that remains is this pale and cold
reproduction. The implicit danger here is in turning the Poet into a “surpassing Spirit” in the
same way that the Poet himself turned his own “Spirit of Solitude” into a transcendent image.
The cradle of humanity was broken not by three steps—Adam’s, Eve’s, and Child’s—but merely
by the Poet’s. The Poet’s journey, in other words, is indistinguishable from Adam’s dream,
except that he doesn’t wake up. In the end we see what is human *not* in his visions, but from his
lack of vision, his ethical blind spots. We learn what is human only indirectly, in the heavy
lifting of the background characters.

Stevens: “To say more than human things with human voice, / That cannot be; to say
human things with more / Than human voice, that, also, cannot be; / To speak humanly from the
height or from the depth / Of human things, that is acutest speech.”⁴

⁴ Quoted from Abrams, MH. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: WW Norton, 1971—p. 69. “Chocorua to Its neighbor.”