



Unveiling the Abyss: The Prefiguration of Existential Philosophy in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Sonnet "Lift not the Painted Veil"

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Abstract. The poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley has risen from the nadir of its literary reputation and achieved increasing scholarly and critical acclaim since the latter half of the past century as a remarkable existence of world literature for its artistic, philosophical, cultural, social, and political relevance. However, while multitudinous scholars have dedicated themselves to unearthing the complexities of his works, Shelley's "Lift not the Painted Veil" remains a sonnet unfathomed by the cohort of researchers within the context of the intellectual discourse. This paper, based on the method of textual analysis, would propose against the traditional vein of scholarly analyses that the sonnet anticipates philosophies of existence by pinpointing its metaphysical meaning and significance. The conclusion is reached that this poem, in a reflection distinguished from the materialist or secular humanist culture, reveals the condition of individual existence—the crisis of Nietzschean nihilism—after the abolition of God's transcendental order, affirming its advent yet ending in negativity with nothing established as to how to cope with the crisis. Although the existentialist is antagonistic to the temper of the Romantic other-worldly dreamer, the fact that the preoccupation with the void pervades the work of such a visionary poet as Shelley implicates that the dichotomy between two apposed ideologies would be obliterated when confronted with the perennial problem of meaninglessness in existence.

Keywords: Lift not the Painted Veil · Percy Bysshe Shelley · Sonnet · Existential Philosophy

1 Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet "Lift not the Painted Veil" (1818), unlike his meditation on Ozymandias' ruined statue in the solitary desert, his apocalyptic imagination in protest of Britain's anarchic potentates, or his longingly solemn invocation to the west wind, is not regarded as the apotheosis of the English poet's achievements in the pantheon of Romantic poetry. However, the poem—comprising two narrative sequences prevailed by the veil image: first in an existential condition with its presence and then in the experience of an individual penetrating its presence—abounds in philosophical implications as a sonnet from the mature body of Shelley's oeuvre [1]. Due to the paucity

of critical exegeses, it remains unexplored as to what this enigmatic text had anticipated by revealing what kind of human condition and individual existence.

The tenor of the poem's few scholarly analyses varies from the accent on its visionary search for hidden beauty to the diagnosis of its pensive *cogito* and subjectivity: either aspirations beyond the vicissitudes of ordinary life drive Shelley to lift the veil or fear of the self's alienation makes Shelley admonish the reader against unveiling. Andrew J Welburn, emphasizing the poem's paradoxes, went so far as to claim that Shelley, an idealist skeptical about his ideal, simultaneously strove to break the agonizing round of mundane experience represented as a tapestry of unreal images and stayed aware of the risk of the self's "inner dissolution" with the forsaken outer "world-order" [2]. However, one might question Welburn's grasp of the sonnet's ultimate sense of disillusionment. Peter Hühn, unlike Welburn, considered the sonnet as one resistant to the "analytic and disillusioned consciousness," arguing that Shelley, in his attempt to overcome the destructive effects of intensified self-consciousness, remonstrated humans against perceiving the essential emptiness of everything [3]. However, given Hühn's account of Shelley's attitude towards the act of lifting the veil, the metaphysical implications of the poem still remain unrecognized. This paper, based on the method of textual analysis, will argue that "Lift not the Painted Veil," in a vein of self-reflective, crisis-like eventfulness that transcends the secular humanist irreligion, anticipates existential philosophy by externalizing an instinctive consciousness of Nietzschean nihilism (the crisis concomitant with God's nonexistence).

This paper is structured into two sections. In the first section, it seeks to unveil the enigma of "Lift not the Painted Veil" through close scrutiny of its metaphoric and prosodic subtleties. The philosophical connotations of the poem's inscape—the veil, the chasm, and the unveiler—will be investigated by applying Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The second section, which focuses on the poem's motif, will highlight what signifiers and symptoms would foreshadow the advent of Nietzschean nihilism, investigating why the sonnet might be considered to anticipate existential philosophy. The speaker's attitude towards the crisis will also be discussed.

2 Decoding "Lift not the Painted Veil" from the Existential Point of View

Before this section unveils its iconographic and prosodic enigmas, it may seem necessary first to have a panoramic view of the inscape of this internally intricate sonnet. The first narrative sequence opens with a warning "Lift not the painted veil"—the veil which, pictured with illusive images in bright hues, spreads over a bleak abyss clouded from the sight of those who call the veil "life" ("the chasm, sightless and drear"); behind, two entities of agents, "Fear/And Hope," are in their lasting movement to weave the veil that covers the chaos or void [1]. For the next eight lines, the narrative shifts from the descriptive pronouncement declared in the present tense to the tale of a seemingly negative example "who had lifted [the veil]" chronicled in the past tense. The sonnet ends in complete negation with the protagonist's discovery, after his act of unveiling, of

nothing lovable, valuable, and knowable (“things to love,” “the which he could approve,” “truth”).

The illusory nature of religion is emphasized by Shelley’s representation of an existential condition. The image of the veil certainly signifies illusion or appearance. However, it may not be understood as the product of *māyā* that hides the undifferentiated, eternal, resplendent innermost self (*ātman*) in Advaita Vedānta, nor is it the construct of art that endows existence with the venerable aesthetic experience; instead, the veil bears great relevance to Christian iconography. Peter Baehr observed that the veil was an essential element in the material culture of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, noting that the veil imagery had defied religious authority and vindicated human freedom since the Enlightenment philosopher-writer Baron d’Holbach’s religious critique entitled *Christianity Unveiled* [4]. Hence Shelley, an avowed atheist, would have employed the veil image with its religious symbolism. However, his reflection in this particular case is not in the spirit of Baron d’Holbach (the reason will be elucidated as this paper progresses). The concluding allusion to *Ecclesiastes* is another index to the sonnet’s starting point from religion. Shelley’s linguistic and imaginal subtleties draw forth the world of illusions: “idly” (literally, “vainly”) reveals the essential insubstantiality of the veil’s illusory images and portends the uncovering of the void in the octave; “painted,” defined as “brightly coloured or variegated, as if painted”, evokes the image of rainbows, thus tincturing the described world with a threat of (self-)dissolution [5]. In its broader meaning, the veil is a signifier, and symptom of the blissful, unproductive existence wherein the faith in transcendence is obliged and the yearning for consolation is in its intensest form.

The sonnet reveals, in its primal mode of expression, the hidden genesis of the Christian religion as the construct and projection of the human mind. Andrew J Welburn considered “Fear” and “Hope” as two alternatives of possible scenarios—“ultimate absurdity” or “grand Truth”—undergone by the protagonist after his unveiling [2]. Nevertheless, such an interpretation would neglect Fear and Hope’s role as the originator of the veil of illusion (“weave”). Rather than being the uncertainties of an unexplored vista beyond it, they determine and sustain the existence of religious transcendence. God’s existence, Albert Camus suggested, could be both asserted by debilitated consciousness in the irrational climate and abstract reason with the recourse to the divine [6]. “Fear,” which is more than the dread of death that persuades one into the spiritual leap, encapsulates what “crushes” and “impoverishes” humans: “the absurd” forcedly deified as “God” when everlasting nothingness is made obvious in an unintelligible cosmos [6]. “Hope,” prior to Christian *espérance*, might be categorized here as reason adapted to “the eternal climate”, the neo-Platonic *nous* transformed later into the biblical God [6]. The sanguine confidence in transcendental absolutes (“Hope) and the horrified recoil at the void (“Fear”) would constitute the same leap of faith. The two are by no means uncontrollable, super-human agents—by “twin Destinies” Shelley rather implied the ineluctability for them to originate the illusion—but are instead limited to the universe of human understanding and experience, testifying to the truism that “all thought is anthropomorphic” [6]. These two minuscule anthropomorphic entities weave their gossamer chimaeras—with human projections of “unreal shapes”—to cover the appalling abyss, the only possibility beyond the human universe.

The protagonist “who had lifted [the veil]” comes close to an instinctive prototype of Nietzsche’s Dionysian hero, who has known “the terrors and horrors of existence” and what Colin Wilson calls the “Existential Outsider”, the figure penetrating the façade erected by humans in front of themselves in order to see meaning in an essentially meaningless existence [7, 8]. Since the experience of this religious outsider is, in fact, that of Shelley himself, scholars have considered the past tense and the hypodiegetic narrative in the sonnet’s second part (ll. 7–14) as distancing devices that conceal self-reflexivity, permit the speaker’s cognitive detachment from his disillusioning experience, and function to deaden its debilitating effect on his existence [3, 9]. However, such an external position also enables the speaker to portray his surrogate as a (heroic) character the way one might do in autobiographical fiction. It is revealed through the sonnet’s prosodic and metaphoric features that the unveiler sees deeper than the rest of the others and that Shelley affirms, rather than denies, his disillusioned consciousness.

The unveiler is represented as a reflective consciousness who alone is aware of the truth of individual existence by Shelley’s structural reversal of classical models. This sonnet, with a rhyme scheme of ababab/cdcd cdcd, breaks formally with all traditional, recognizable types, including Petrarchan, Spenserian, and Shakespearean. Here octave antecedes sestet: there is no “conclusion, interpretation or insight” reached by the sestet subsequent to the octave’s narration of experience, as is in the case of classical sonnets [9]. The old order is reversed, the old wisdom subverted; no practical lesson or moral of Æsop’s fable could be taught in conclusion. The cautionary “Lift not” is declared in the opening line—thus transformed from the concluding caution into an imperative, a command, and an inviolable principle. Therefore, the protagonist’s unveiling is made an *active* transgression: the genuine virtue of Prometheus [7]. Due to his defiant act of violating the laws, the brave individual—the opposite of the negative example who invites nemesis for heedless follies—has acquired Dionysiac wisdom to know beyond the illusion. The unveiler is close to one who has “a glance into the abyss,” the “appalling truth” of the eventual dissolution of individuality, the all-obliterating effect of death, and the ineluctability of suffering [7].

In terms of metaphoric descriptions, the unveiler—contrary to the negative example subjected to unsparing devaluation for ignoring warning and admonition—is valued as a solitary individual alienated from the herdlike crowd with the profound depth beneath him. Shelley’s heroization of the individual as a lofty figure of unrecognized height is made manifest by his expression in metaphors of light: “Through the unheeding many he did move,/A splendour among shadows, a bright blot/Upon this gloomy scene” [1]. While the protagonist is the referent of metaphors of light (“splendour,” “bright blot”), those of darkness have distinct significations: “shadows” are the masses set in contrast with the individual, and “this gloomy scene” is what the individual subject perceives after his profound disillusionment. The individual, who abides in the dark truth of the abyss, becomes a brilliant effulgence (“splendour”), whereas the herd, in lights and illusions of the veil, remains benighted (“shadows”). Therefore, the disillusioned consciousness—albeit with disruptive darkness, the vastness of a “gloomy scene”—is transvalued into an illumination, with the individual’s afflicting knowledge of the ineluctability of suffering. It is possible to interpret the connotations of the oxymoron “bright blot” from both external and internal standpoints. From the perspective of the uncomprehending herd,

the term implies that he, who is the brightest among people, appears a superfluous mistake to them. From the perspective of the individual's introspective self, the term expresses his own sense of alienation due to existential nausea after his experience—compounded with an elevated consciousness of being risen above the rest—in a “child's world” of visions, the one “purer” in its air of expectation [8]. In either case of interpretation, Shelley affirms the outsider with disillusioned consciousness, the unveiler who errs, understands, “suffers and glorifies himself” [7].

3 “Lift not the Painted Veil” as the Prefiguration of Existential Philosophy

The reader might object here that the sonnet, having nothing to do with the philosophies of existence, is instead under the sway of Platonic idealism. Shelley scholar Michael O'Neill argued in his book *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations that the veil image was employed by “a straightforward believer in Platonic forms”* and that the act of unveiling was done by someone who is the “exemplum of idealist folly” [5]. According to this perspective, the variegated veil, whereon people ensnared by its delusion perceive but the misleading simulacrum of what they wish to believe, may bear an analogy to the underground den wherein “unenlightened” human beings behold only their passing shadows cast the fire on the wall. Dissatisfied with the present game of appearance and illusion, the transient, mutable play of the sensuous image, the lost “Spirit” sighs for the intellectual vision of truth in a realm beyond this earth. Hence the protagonist might be, after all, a disappointed visionary thwarted in his search for the Other World of supra-sensible values: beauty (“things to love”), goodness (“the which he could approve”), and reality (“truth”).

However, “Lift not the Painted Veil” is essentially a negation of Platonic idealism. The image of “the chasm” negates in the first place the very entity of any transcendental signified: beneath the brightly colored veil of illusion lies the vertiginous abyss. After escaping from the cave, the prisoner perceives and understands the pure form illumined by the effulgent sun. The unveiler, when he does gaze beyond, discovers nothing save that there is no supra-sensible world of the absolute, eternal, and immutable. The contrast between the veil image and Plato's cave can be charted in Table 1. According to Table 1, the veil image's metaphysical signification is the reversal of Plato's cave. It signifies, in lieu of the shadow-stained realm of senses, the human construct of super-sensory value and the fundamental falsity feeding “those who live,” whereunder lies the abyss: the inner terror of human existence after the dissolution of super-sensory value, or, in particular, Christian religion [1]. There is only a negation of the Other World with the annihilated force of illusions. Thus, the unveiler's questing heart bespeaks not his rational faith in Platonic forms but a primordial longing for meaning and clarity in an essentially telos empty existence. A radical difference also exists in the quiddity of images themselves: Plato's cave is the prison-house that contains, confines, and keeps in the dark, the escape from which is only managed by the guardian-philosopher, whereas the veil image in the poem is the gossamer, insubstantial presence that cloaks the void, liable to self-dissolution or destruction by whoever has the volitional aspirations to tear it aside.

Table 1. Difference between the veil image and Plato’s cave

The sonnet Absence of lessons The disillusion of subjective consciousness experienced & described (the negation of Creative Deity after individual skepticism)	The parable Illustration of principles The reveling of objective reality ideated & explained (human confidence leading to the assertion of Creative Deity)
Prohibition against unveiling The “erring” individual Bright illusions as supra-sensory value <i>The veil</i> Hope and fear (primordial human concerns)	Knowledge, Socratic wisdom <i>The sun</i> (truth/the good in the intellectual vision) The world of Ideas, where God exists Clarity
Interrogation of meanings	Recognition of objects themselves
Unintelligibility The cosmos, where God does not exist <i>The abyss</i> (the void/no inscription of “the good”) Suffering, Dionysiac wisdom	Ignorance (destitution of philosophy) <i>The cave</i> Dark shadows in sense-perception Guardian/philosopher Persuasion to escape

What distinguishes his consciousness from the radicalism of refusing to deny the authorship of a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*—i.e., what makes “Lift not the Painted Veil” a text anticipating existential philosophy—is Shelley’s revelation of the eventfulness following the abolition of religious transcendence. Whereas existentialists consider it serious trouble that no authoritative system of values is foreordained, secular humanists remain completely unalarmed at the effect of God’s death on the human condition [10]. Shelley felt, as an existentialist does, the breath of *nihilum* and meaninglessness when the veil of illusion is destroyed, externalizing the individual experience in a “world-without-values”: the inhuman universe of no objective values in affective, ethical, and epistemological terms [8]. The failure of “things to love” signifies the moment when the love for God and immortality becomes impossible [1]. Discovering nothing to approve denotes the collapse of established moral foundations and *a priori* justifiable “code of ethics” without any transcendent order [6]. The loss of truth—originally a constellation of anthropomorphic things—occurs when the universe is divested of “the illusory meaning with which [humans] had clothed [it]” [6]. Hence the protagonist is faced with one austere fact: it is inscribed nowhere that the good exists [10]. Although he is not God’s calculated assassin, the unveiler does share the same “untimeliness” with Nietzsche’s madman. “[T]he unheeding many,” like people in the marketplace, remain indifferent to the fact but instead make the lucid consciousness appear unnatural and insane [1]. Shelley’s position is against the grain of Baron d’Holbach, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx, for the anguished freedom of “Everything is permitted” is not celebrated as a jubilant triumph or final liberation but instead accompanies three negatives (“found them not” “nor” “found it not”) that spell the “bitter acknowledgement of a fact” [6].

The ending, marked by Shelley's lack of response to the crisis, remains troubled, making "Lift not the Painted Veil" a work anticipating existentialist thought, if not an existentialist work itself. Shelley's speaker demonstrates no stance of *savoir-vivre*, nor is any solution offered to surmount the existential void: the octave ends in *ex negativo* expression, devoid of closure. The protagonist is the unveiler, the penetrator, yet not the creator. He has no Dionysian strength to laugh at life's toil and accident, nor does he, like Sisyphus at the mountain's foot, fill his heart with the individual struggle towards the height. However, despite the absence of response, viz. The joyous affirmation of suffering or the passionate revolt against the absurd, Shelley has the position that the painted veil must be lifted at all costs: one could not retreat into the benighted crowd once the abyss has been unveiled, and one could not reverse or undo the knowledge gained, as well as the event experienced after the disillusionment [3]. It should be emphasized that Shelley did not remonstrate against the crisis of nihilism by "earnestly warning" the reader not to lift the veil as Peter Hühn has claimed; on the contrary, he accepted and received the advent of the crisis—albeit not explicitly—by affirming the individual consciousness exorcised of the illusion: the disillusioned unveiler raised as "A splendour among shadows" above the "unheeding many" [1]. Due to the defiant unveiling of religion, the individual consciousness of the crisis, and yet the absence of response to it, this sonnet—a descriptive, not explanatory work of subjective experiences and consciousness—may be perceived as one anticipating the philosophies of individual existence.

4 Conclusion

A less discussed poem of philosophical aura and polemical potential, Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet "Lift not the Painted Veil" has remained hitherto unrecognized by scholars in its amount of metaphysical implications. The sonnet has been considered to either concern the idealist search for supra-sensible ultimates or the escapist denial of radical self-consciousness. However, this sonnet, a pensive yet incisive interrogation of existence and the self, anticipates existential philosophy in its revelation of the human condition after negating religious transcendence.

The poem's iconography not only indicates the illusory nature of theistic foundations by employing the veil image but also reveals the human construct of the Christian religion (and, by inference, all supra-sensible value) through a representation of its origins: hope, the rational longing for transcendental absolutes, and fear, the irrational anguish at the everlasting nothingness. After the abyss is unveiled, the terror of individual existence, Shelley externalizes consciousness of nihilism in a world-without-values—differentiated from the materialist, secular humanist position. Despite his non-response to the crisis of nihilism, which is to be coped with by existential philosophers, Shelley tacitly accepts and affirms the advent of the crisis by transvaluing the unveiler's disillusioned consciousness into an epiphany via metaphors of light and, with a structural reversal of the traditional narrative, transforming unveiling into an act of Promethean transgression and the unveiler into one who has acquired superior, albeit afflicting knowledge. With a veil and an abyss to reveal human existence, with a command and a transgression to glorify the human self, "Lift not the Painted Veil" is a sonnet about skepticism and autonomy: a poetical prefiguration of existential philosophy.

This research reveals that, although such a Romantic “dreamer” as Shelley may often be the derision of existentialist literary critique, the existentialist would find their ideological foe concerned with exactly the same problem of what they seek to address. The dichotomization between the Romantic and the existentialist is eroded in the face of the essential meaninglessness of individual existence; the anxiety, which is not something discovered by the existentialist, is *there* as the primordial feeling of humans. Existential philosophy, as a timeless expression of the human subject, would be the need for individual consciousness, especially in a postmodern climate in which nihilism has become the vogue, the taste, the habitudes, and perhaps, the ideologies.

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