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Shelley's *Excursion*

The relationship between William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's later poetry seems a hardly auspicious topic. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley records: "Shelley brings home Wordsworths Excursion of which we read a part—much disappointed—He is a slave—."[1] In high excitement, Shelley had bought a copy of *The Excursion* almost immediately on his return from the continent in September 1814, and according to Mary's journal, he was far from enthusiastic about the poem. Though we can, as other critics have, trace a falling away from Wordsworth dating from *The Excursion*, with the high point of his response being the *Alastor* volume, instead, I want to suggest that *The Excursion* provided a spur to Shelley's imagination throughout his career and, in particular, in his later works. Letitia Landon asked "who could for a moment have hesitated as to whether a poem was marked with the actual and benevolent philosophy of Wordsworth, or the beautiful but ideal theory of Shelley?,"[2] and this comparison, though veering into caricature, goes some way to suggesting the way in which Shelley wrote himself into dialogue with Wordsworth. While Stephen Behrendt's subtle examination of Shelley's relationship with his readers details how closely Shelley read his older peer's work, and Charles E. Robinson deftly reveals the significance of peer-to-peer debate for Shelley's poetic imagination,[3] this article focuses upon Shelley's imaginative response to *The Excursion*. The relationship between Shelley's later poetry and *The Excursion* goes far beyond verbal echoes. Nor is it simply political. Shelley's one-sided debate with Wordsworth saw him subtly pitting his poetics against Wordsworth's poetics, Shelleyan philosophy against Wordsworthian thought. But this is not a mere Oedipal struggle or a version of competitive sibling rivalry. Instead, Shelley sought to engage

with Wordsworth's ideas, sometimes seeking to correct his older peer, sometime reflecting upon and restaging Wordsworthian ideas in his own poetry. *The Excursion* was not a poem to reject. It was the epic that would tease Shelley into complex thought.

Jeffrey Cox pours cold water on the idea of reading Shelley and his peers as alive to the ambiguity of *The Excursion*. Writing of interpretations of *The Excursion* that emphasize the doubt within the poetry:

> I do not wish to dispute these various strong readings of the poem, but merely to state the obvious – that they were not available to Hunt or Hazlitt or Shelley as they came to read and to rewrite the *Excursion.* I also think that granting the poem a certain aesthetic knowingness loses sight of its cultural power, the ability it had at the time to inspire and to infuriate. That the younger poets could not ignore the *Excursion*'s poetic power while at the same time they resisted its ideological stance made Wordsworth's poem a key test of poetry's ability to speak in the age of reaction and reform.[4]

While, like Cox, I wouldn't wish to downplay *The Excursion*'s ability "to inspire and to infuriate," the writers he mentions are also gifted literary critics, and may not have needed any such "strong readings" to guide them through the nuances of *The Excursion*. In the case of Shelley, he would and could grant Wordsworth "aesthetic knowingness" even as he might react against its "ideological stance." Shelley's poetry reveals a long and frequently shifting spectrum of reactions to Wordsworth and *The Excursion*, where the younger poet moved far beyond being broadly for or against Wordsworth's epic. Shelley anatomized his own feeling for the poem and for its poet

across many poems, poems that are rarely only about, but often in subtle dialogue with, Wordsworth's shadowy, changing, and consistent presence in his work.

Though *Alastor,* "To Wordsworth," and "Verses Written Upon Receiving a Celandine from England" are often taken as Shelley's definitive response to Wordsworth (notwithstanding *Peter Bell the Third*), Shelley's interest in Wordsworth, and his *Excursion*, continues well beyond these poems. *The Witch of Atlas* and *Peter Bell the Third* show Shelley thinking with Wordsworth in typically nuanced fashion, demanding of his own work that both he and his reader reflect upon the nature of Wordsworth's poetic achievements and persona. Stuart Peterfreund rightly sees *Alastor* as the poem that most clearly seeks to pit its ideas against *The Excursion*'s, but his sense that "[t]hrough his interrogation of Wordsworth, Shelley came to understand both the older poet's vision and its failure, which Shelley located in *The Excursion* (1814)" overstates both the limitations of *The Excursion* and Shelley's critical acumen. [5] With Michael O'Neill, I claim that *The Excursion* is "a masterpiece," and like him, see Shelley continuing to draw on its power in *Laon and Cythna*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Triumph of Life*.[6] It is in these examples of some of Shelley's finest philosophical poetry, that Shelley returns to *The Excursion* less to "poach[ing] on [Wordsworth's] manor" than to reconsider and recalibrate key areas of Wordsworthian thought as expressed in *The Excursion*.[7]

Shelley frequently reconceptualises the philosophical scaffolding of his predecessors' work in his own poetry. His approach to Spenser's *Fairie Queene*, explored by Greg Kucich,[8] sees him balance a fine appreciation of the poetry against serious intellectual misgivings about Spenser's ideology. Such a nuanced approach is key to Shelley's

performance as a poet-critic. Shelley draws a line between the fallen opinion that might be found in poetry and the eternal beauty that distinguishes it as poetry, even asking if such issues might "be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears" (*A Defence of Poetry*, 681).[9] Thomas Love Peacock glosses Shelley's allusion in a letter to "the scale of that balance which the Giant (of Arthegall) holds" in the following way:

> Shelley once pointed out this passage to me, observing: "Artegall argues with the Giant; the Giant has the best of the argument; Artegall's iron man knocks him over into the sea and drowns him. This is the usual way in which power deals with opinion." I said: "That was not the lesson which Spenser intended to convey." "Perhaps not," he said; "it is the lesson which he conveys to me. I am of the Giant's faction."[10]

Shelley reads against the Spenserian grain. Where Spenser inveighs against the demagoguery of "the Giant's faction," Shelley knowingly takes the opposite tack to his predecessor. Yet Shelley does not apply the same oppositional stance to his reading of *The Excursion*. Rather, Shelley counters Wordsworthian philosophy, magnifying the spots of doubt and questioning implicit in *The Excursion* that shadow even the most apparently didactic or certain moments of the epic.

Leigh Hunt, in his penetrating review of *Laon and Cythna*, immediately discerned the note of correction embedded into the Preface to Shelley's epic, writing: "If the Lake School, as they are called, were not so dogmatic in their despair as they used to be in their hope, we should earnestly recommend the passage to their attention."[11] But Shelley does not simply make the Lake School his whipping boy. John Taylor Coleridge notices Shelley's fascination with Wordsworth before crudely labeling him

"a unsparing imitator."[12] But Shelley goes far beyond the bounds of imitation. Anointing himself the new, even "true Wordsworth,"[13] he even writes the Solitary into his epic as part of a composite figure, the Hermit.[14] But what is significant here is the idea of the "true Wordsworth;" if Shelley found himself disappointed with the democratic credentials of his mentor, then he would demonstrate how much he had learned from Wordsworth before going on to surpass him. One of the key means of demonstrating the relationship between the two is Shelley's creation of the Hermit, apparently modelled on Dr James Lind, the physician at Eton, William Godwin, and Wordsworth's Solitary,[15] along with overtones of the Hermit in romance tradition.[16] Melting one of Wordsworth's characters into a composite creation in Shelley's poem reveals a fascinating poetic rather than personal relationship between the poets, where Wordsworth's work comes to seem a kind of John the Baptist to Shelley's poetry's Christ-like vision. Wordsworth is not Wordsworth the man, but a representative of the radical vision, shared by the likes of William Godwin, that had been muted or adapted by the French Revolution's violent aftermath.

In *Laon and Cythna*, canto III narrates how slavers abduct the eponymous pair, and Laon's response, in contrast to Cythna's calm resolve, is troublingly violent. Murdering three of his captors, and injuring a fourth, Laon does not dwell on his actions, instead ascribing them to "one impulse" (*CPPBS* 3. III. X. 87),[17] but Shelley refrains from condemning Laon's behaviour. Rather than punishment,[18] Shelley offers a model of sympathetic rehabilitation for poet, rehabilitation provided by the Hermit. The Hermit's counsel strengthens Laon's resolve, but in an important reversal, Laon's rehabilitation re-inspires the hermit's ailing hopes. Combining "Soft looks of pity" (*CPPBS* 3. IV. VI. 52) with "A glance as keen as is the lightning's stroke" (*CPPBS* 3.

IV. VI. 53), the relationship between the pair reveals understanding as a far greater method of reform than punitive measures. Teaching, as Carlos Baker points out, by example rather than precept,[19] Shelley has the relationship between Laon and the Hermit reveal the importance of mutual sympathy, where it is the younger man, scarred by his recent experience, who reinvigorates the older man, who had wilfully separated himself from a society that had proved itself blind to his teachings.

The relationship between Laon and the Hermit enacts the poet's ideal education as the Hermit provides both comfort and inspiration that softens his torment but fits him for continued struggle. The Hermit reveals his status as a poet to Laon, outlining how he had prepared the ground for revolution: "

> Out of the hopes of thine aspirings bold,
> Have I collected language to unfold
> Truth to my countrymen

(*CPPBS* 3. IV. XII. 103-5).

This quiet preparation of the populace had created an impetus within the hearts and minds of the people as they harbour "A warmer zeal, a nobler hope now find; / And every bosom thus is rapt and shook," (*CPPBS* 3. IV. XIII. 115-6) but had not yielded the longed-for overhaul of political tyranny.

The parallels between Wordsworth's poetic vision as understood by Shelley and the Hermit's story are clear. The Hermit, disillusioned by his experience

> had beheld the woe
> In which mankind was bound, but deemed that fate
> Which made them abject, would preserve them so;

(*CPPBS* 3. IV. IX. 74-6).

Lacking faith owing to experience, these lines encapsulate the dejection felt in the aftermath of the French Revolution, a dejection found in *The Excursion*, that Shelley sought to correct with the appearance of Laon in the Hermit's life. Laon's advent revives the Hermit, as the older poet meets his younger counter-part. But the Hermit's failure to affect a revolution does not render him a failed poet. Unlike Laon, who has Cythna, the "apple of Shelley's revolutionary eye,"[20] and Prometheus, who finds his sympathetic other in Asia, the Hermit lacks an ideal "reader" who can connect with his poetry. Deeming himself Laon's "passive instrument," (*CPPBS* 3. IV. XVI. 136) the Hermit conceives of himself as inspired by rather than the inspirer of Laon. If Wordsworth, in *The Excursion*, had seemed to Shelley to be writing a palinode to his earlier works, *Laon and Cythna* hymns the possibility of Wordsworth re-embracing his earlier status as the democratic poet fit to lead and inspire future generations of poets. Shelley's evaluation of Wordsworth hinges on whether the older poet will choose to be again what he had once been to the younger poet.

But *The Excursion* retains its vital importance for Shelley throughout his career as the younger poet did not see *Laon and Cythna* as a definitive response to Wordsworth's poem. Shelley drew themes from *The Excursion*, even ideas but briefly glanced at in the epic, such as the suffering of Prometheus. In Book VI of *The Excursion*, the Solitary bitterly moves through a history of suffering, listing Prometheus' agonies along with Tantalus' torment, sounding the Byronic note when he traces, "poor humanity's afflicted will / Struggling in vain with ruthless destiny" (VI. 571-2).[21] Though the Pastor offers an appropriately pious reply, emphasizing that God tests his people when he poses his rhetorical question: "if Faith were left untried / How could

the might—that lurks within her—then / Be shewn?" (VI. 578-80), Shelley discovers a more serious point to Promethean pain. For *Prometheus Unbound* follows, in more ways than one, Shelley's more overtly political epic, *Laon and Cythna*. In *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley deliberately crafts a narrative that claims the titular figures as human heroes that speak with an unassailable authority and rightness. *Prometheus Unbound* operates far differently. Though profoundly inflected by and in touch with the realities of its age, *Prometheus Unbound* chooses to abstract its politics and poetics from recognisable reality into the realm of the imagination. Like *The Excursion*, the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* creates a dialogic structure where competing visions of reality vie for supremacy. *Prometheus Unbound*, rejecting the Spenserians of his earlier *Laon And Cythna*, follows Wordsworth in beginning his poem in what Seamus Perry terms a "multi-vocal" form.[22] But where Wordsworth chooses to continue to allow various voices, from the Pastor and his stories, to the Solitary's doubts, to the Wanderer's determined optimism, *Prometheus Unbound* moves, in its form, genre, and language, from dissonance to harmony in its ambitious rewriting of possibility, possibility that goes far beyond simply offering proof of faith. *Prometheus Unbound* seeks to lead Wordsworth by its example, suggesting how poetry can move beyond moral and political stasis into a fluent and fluid recalibration of reality.

Shelley incorporates key questions from *The Excursion* into *Prometheus Unbound*, sensing, as does Alison Hickey, that "*The Excursion* is, of all Wordsworth's poems, the one that raises the most pressing questions about the relation of figure to direct statement, and thus about what poetry has to do with political, social, or philosophical matters."[23] Despite what Edward Bostetter calls the "determinedly optimistic tone" of *The Excursion*, like him, Shelley also sensed "progressive impoverishment and

exhaustion of ideas."[24] Where *The Excursion* ends with a picnic and a significantly unconverted Solitary, *Prometheus Unbound* closes with an almost symphonic transformation of the world. P. M. S. Dawson sees *Prometheus Unbound* as embodying imaginative renovation: "the world must be transformed in imagination before it can be changed politically, and it is here that the poet can exert an influence over 'opinion'."[25] Rather than aligning Wordsworth with the Solitary, as G. Kim Blank suggests,[26] or identifying Wordsworth as the detached and almost Panglossian Wanderer, Shelley instead seeks to correct Wordsworth at the level of the role of the poet.

The poet's vision, sidelined in *The Excursion* by the Poet seeming to observe rather than direct action, becomes the central power of *Prometheus Unbound*. O'Neill points out that Shelley restyles the Solitary's language in book nine:[27]

> "The Fire, that burned so brightly to our wish,
> Where is it now? Deserted on the beach
> It seems extinct; nor shall the fanning breeze
> Revive its ashes. What care we for this,
> Whose ends are gained? Behold an emblem here
> Of one day's pleasure, and all mortal joys!
>
> (IX. 550-5)

Vivid in its despair, the Solitary does not simply mourn the loss of the flame, but the onlookers' apathetic reaction to such a loss. This tempts us into a Shelleyan interpretation of "To Wordsworth"'s ilk, where we could read the extinct flame as Wordsworth's "visionary gleam" ("Ode: 'There was a time'," 56) where its loss is unmourned by readers who have "gained" the poem that they sought.[28] "Behold an

emblem here" rises to the level of scornful rhetoric, where the Solitary teaches us a lesson that rings with the awfulness of truth. Assuming the role of the teacher, the Solitary veers dangerously close to become a proxy for Wordsworth. However, the lack of response from the other protagonists to this speech transforms the tenor of the writing from dialogue into what William Galperin terms a collection of "various monologues" that suggest a "debate that they never quite rise to."[29]

But Shelley, though he might scorn the official morality of the Wanderer, is no supporter of the Solitary without caveats. Richard Gravil writes that "[w]e are required (and enabled) by the poetry to engage with [the Solitary's] sorrows," and Shelley, by quoting the Solitary, engages without agreement.[30] For when *Prometheus Unbound* registers a verbal echo of the Solitary's words, the words are spoken by one of the Furies reading the image of Christ's sacrifice:

> Behold an emblem: those who do endure
> Deep wrongs for man, and scorn, and chains, but heap
> Thousandfold torment on themselves and him.
>
> (I. 594-6)

Sharing with the Solitary an authority that seems inalienable, Shelley shows that the relationship between rhetoric and truth is as opaque. Prometheus moves beyond the Furies' restrictive interpretation of the scene, just as Shelley, as reader, must move beyond Wordsworth's politics and poetics. Like the Solitary, the Furies' mode of speech is imperative, having the effect of seeming like revealed truth. For Shelley, to reject their reality is to think without fetters, and discover the possibilities for reimagining and reordering reality.

Wordsworth and Shelley dwell on the power of words and poetry in their respective poems. Book IV, or "Despondency Corrected," sees Wordsworth give the Wanderer space to inveigh against the Solitary's melancholic alienation of book III, and the admiring Poet summarizes the Wanderer's rhetorical achievement in his preceding speeches:

> —So did he speak:
>
> The words he uttered shall not pass away;
>
> For they sank into me—the bounteous gift
>
> Of One whom time and nature had made wise,
>
> Gracing his language with authority
>
> Which hostile spirits silently allow;
>
> Of One accustomed to desires that feed
>
> On fruitage gathered from the Tree of Life;
>
> To hopes on knowledge and experience built;
>
> Of one in whom persuasion and belief
>
> Had ripened into faith, and faith become
>
> A passionate intuition; whence the Soul,
>
> Though bound to Earth by ties of pity and love,
>
> From all injurious servitude was free.

(*The Excursion* IV. 1279-92)

These lines offered Shelley a rich seam to mine. Wordsworth sets up an image of the Poet as both reader and creator of poetry, and Shelley's poetry reveals the depth of his response to such an intuition. Reader and creator himself, Shelley borrows the image of words as leaves dispersed by the wind in "Ode to the West Wind," but turns this praise of the Wanderer's speech on its head, offering a competing version where the

"[a]shes and sparks" ("Ode to the West Wind," 5. 67) of Shelleyan poetry become vitally indebted to but strongly independent from the older poet's work. Where "persuasion and belief / Had ripened into faith" for *The Excursion*'s Wanderer, Shelley undoes the idea of persuaded faith as a positive in *Prometheus Unbound,* as freedom from "injurious servitude" becomes open to question in Shelley's lyrical drama.

Shelley's verbal echo, "Speak: thy strong words may never pass away" (*Prometheus Unbound* IV. 553), though only a single line, scarcely attempts to disguise the poem's attempt to counter the Poet's approval of the Wanderer's quietist doctrine. Earlier in book IV, the Wanderer had preached the danger of aspiring beyond fixed limits. Adopting the prophetic tone from his lofty vantage point, the Wanderer inveighs against this "Vain-glorious generation" (IV. 279), addressing them as a group that fail to understand their proper place:

> Ye aspire
> "Rashly, to fall once more; and that false fruit,
> "Which, to your over-weening spirits, yields
> "Hope of a flight celestial, will produce
> "Misery and shame. But Wisdom of her sons
> "Shall not the less, though late, be justified."
> Such timely warning," said the Wanderer, "gave
> That visionary Voice; and, at this day,
> When a Tartarian darkness overspreads
> The groaning nations; when the Impious rule,
> By will or by established ordinance,

> Their own dire agents, and constrain the Good
> To acts which they abhor; though I bewail
> This triumph, yet the pity of my heart
> Prevents me not from owning, that the law,
> By which Mankind now suffers, is most just.

(*The Excursion* IV. 290-305)

The Miltonic references bolster the epic grandeur of the lines, where this generation and their aspirations seem no more than another group of failed over-reachers, Faustian in a self-delusion that can only culminate in "misery and despair." Authority sponsors doctrine, as Wordsworth affirms, with a far sharper political edge than Pope had, that "whatever is, is RIGHT" (*Essay on Man* I. X. 294).[31] Though admitting the presence of "Tartarian darkness," the Wanderer will not countenance despair, nor will he condemn the system that allows such darkness to exist. He insists that "the pity of my heart / Prevents me not from owning, that the law, / By which mankind now suffers, is most just." Any pity he might feel cannot move the Wanderer to alter his belief, or the faith commended by the Poet, that no matter what abuse might arise from the law, the law itself remains sacrosanct. The wisdom propounded is that one must remain aloof from the political or cultural tempest and refrain from indulging in aspiring revolutionary dreams or embittered debilitating despair.

Such a perspective makes it into *Prometheus Unbound*, most notably in the Furies' speeches, whose sympathy for Prometheus' suffering is carefully calculated to entrap him within the current system rather than inspire alternative modes of thinking. By resisting the Furies, and, by extension, the Wanderer's appeal to the status quo, Prometheus achieves the mental revolution that propels Asia, Demogorgon, and the

Spirit of the Hour to hasten the advent of the overthrow of Jupiter's rule. At the close of Act III, the Spirit of the Hour relates the change wrought over the earth once mental revolution had taken place:

> The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
> Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
> All men believed or hoped, is torn aside;
> The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
> Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
> Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree: the king
> Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man:
> Passionless? no, yet free from guilt or pain,
> Which were, for his will made or suffered them,
> Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
> From chance, and death, and mutability,
> The clogs of that which else might oversoar
> The loftiest star of unascended Heaven,
> Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

(*Prometheus Unbound* III.iv. 190-204)

Referring back to his earlier work, Shelley revisits the image of the "painted veil," present in his poetry from "Lift not the painted veil" to his prose poem, the later *A Defence of Poetry,* creating a sense of unity of purpose in his poetry suggestive of a parallel between Wordsworth's *Recluse* project and how Shelley viewed his body of work. As in many of Shelley's poems,[32] hope is dangerous, and is revealed as an illusion, one meant to mimic life rather than be a vital part of its fabric. These lines

are a carefully calibrated strike against the "dark yet mighty faith" (*Prometheus Unbound* III.iv. 174) that those, such as the Wanderer, propound.

Rather than denounce the Wanderer or, by extension, Wordsworth, for offering a doctrine with which Shelley disagreed, Shelley's lines insist that only once the revolution is complete will the depth and complexity of falsehood be revealed. Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* offers a demanding formulation of the poet that insists that the poet must perform as both legislator and prophet, where the ideal poet is one who "essentially comprises and unites both these characters" (*A Defence of Poetry*, 677). Shelley's imaginative mission in these lines is to imagine a world without the "law," a law that Wordsworth's Wanderer felt was "right," and reveal how humanity might be altered by its removal. Shelley does not simply peel away injustice, but "All men believed or hoped," suggesting that even our aspirations have been colored and conditioned by the oppressive and "loathsome mask." Now, hope and belief, and that which was called life, are replaced by an achieved state of liberated being. Imagining mankind in terms of what they no longer must suffer, Shelley's negatives, explored by Timothy Webb,[33] also point to the state in which humanity currently exists. Limited by class and nation, Shelley paints a portrait of contemporary society as brutalized by the listed adjectives. Shelley exposes that which humanity suffers in order to reveal that which it could become. If poets are, "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not" (*A Defence of Poetry*, 701), Shelley seeks, in this passage, to offer an insight into our current state and our potential to be otherwise. The poet, for Shelley, must do more than reify current "reality," but offer an imaginative means of seeing past it to other, deeper truths.

Prometheus Unbound's subtitle, "lyrical drama," recalls Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, and this gesture suggests the way in which Shelley seeks to update *The Excursion* through his use of form and genre as well as his poetic content. It is no accident that the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* shares its blank verse form with *The Excursion*. Though we could see Shelley as beginning his lyrical drama with emphasis on the dramatic part of this formulation through his use of blank verse, Shelley could not have failed to notice that blank verse had become associated with Wordsworth.[34] And this most Wordsworthian of all possible poetic forms opens *Prometheus Unbound*, only to be jettisoned once the poem reaches the pinnacle of its expressive power. Rhyme becomes a means of poetic liberation from the "Tartarean darkness" which "overspreads / The groaning nations" (*The Excursion* IV. 298-9). Shelley's experimentation throughout the "composite order" of his lyrical drama is not merely formal.[35] In *Prometheus Unbound*, the implied potential of generic hybridity offers the lyrical drama a subtle trajectory where Shelley begins with Prometheus's tormented blank verse hell to the beauties of experimental and self-delighting poetic language. *Prometheus Unbound* makes embodiment rather than description the hallmark of Shelleyan drama, where formal ingenuity becomes the key means of inscribing the revolutionary power of Shelley's imaginative vision.

The Triumph of Life offers an unsettling counter narrative to such an understanding of how Shelley interacts with *The Excursion*. Rather than form operating as a liberating possibility open to the visionary poet, Shelley has his *terza rima* leap and jolt, where the tactical enjambment seems to resist, with some violence, the compulsion to adhere to the strict formal conventions defined by the *terza rima* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Yet Shelley has his form subtly challenge Wordsworth's blank verse choice, where he eschews verbal echoes or poetic allusions in favor of grappling with the large philosophical questions posed by *The Excursion* on his own formal turf. In a letter of 10 April 1822, a month before Shelley began composing *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley wrote a restless and shifting letter to John Gisborne that elucidated a key problem the younger poet felt when reading Wordsworth's poetry:

> Perhaps all discontent with the less (to use a Platonic sophism) supposes the sense of a just claim to the greater, & that we admirers of Faust are in the right road to Paradise.—Such a supposition is not more absurd, and is certainly less demoniacal than that of Wordsworth—where he says—
>
> > This earth,
> >
> > Which is the world of all of us, & where
> >
> > We find our happiness or not at all.[36]

(*Letters: PBS* 2. 406–7)

Perhaps unfairly, Shelley skewers Wordsworth, in contrast to Goethe, for choosing to focus on "[T]his earth." Yet Shelley does not reject the humanist Wordsworth, but rather the sense of "[T]his earth" as a place of fixities rather than fluidity. Shelley, invoking Goethe as his ally, emphasizes the "sense of a just claim to the greater" rather than the lesser, implicitly the world as things are, and it is in *The Excursion* that Shelley might have found such acceptance of what is rather than what could be. *The Triumph of Life* seems to put pressure on Wordsworth's claim from the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," that "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject."[37] Shelley scrutinizes the very possibility of such a steady gaze in his demanding visionary poem.

Shelley had already taken aim at what he perceived to be a lack of imagination with regards to Wordsworth's version of seeing in *Peter Bell the Third*.

> He had as much imagination
>
> As a pint-pot:—he never could
>
> Fancy another situation
>
> From which to dart his contemplation,
>
> Than that wherein he stood.

(*Peter Bell the Third*, IV. 298-302)

Though praising Wordsworth in Wordsworth's own terms for "An apprehension clear, intense" (*Peter Bell the Third*, IV. 309), it is the failure to imagine oneself in another situation, or imagine sympathetically, that, for Shelley, stymies Wordsworth's art. G. Kim Blank points out that *Peter Bell the Third* "is as much an evaluation of Wordsworth's poetry and poetics as it is of his politics."[38] Such an evaluative critical instinct became the grounds of his poetic achievement in *The Triumph of Life* where, like *The Excursion*, Shelley makes his poem vitally dialogic, replacing Wordsworth's Wanderer, Poet, Solitary, and Pastor, with his vision of Life's ravening procession, its human victims, and his interaction with Rousseau. Profoundly engaged with *The Excursion*'s search for meaning, *The Triumph of Life* insists on scrutinizing life and its impact on the dead and the living, to offer a vision to rival his older peer's achievement.

Book III of *The Excursion* furnished Shelley with some of the most compelling philosophical discussions of the entire poem. Discussing the purpose of life, the Wanderer and the Solitary seem to offer competing versions of understanding, despite the effect seeming more like a psychomachia than the dramatic debate of discrete

characters.[39] When the Wanderer praises "that fair-faced Cottage-boy" (*The Excursion* III. 202), the Solitary responds to his optimistic appraisal with a dark understanding life's corroding power:

> "Far happiest," answered the desponding Man,
> "If, such as now he is, he might remain!
> Ah! what avails Imagination high
> Or Question deep? what profits all that Earth,
> Or Heaven's blue Vault, is suffered to put forth
> Of impulse or allurement, for the Soul
> To quit the beaten track of life, and soar
> Far as she finds a yielding element
> In past or future; far as she can go
> Through time or space; if neither in the one,
> Nor in the other region, nor in aught
> That Fancy, dreaming o'er the map of things,
> Hath placed beyond these penetrable bounds,
> Words of assurance can be heard; if no where
> A habitation, for consummate good,
> Or for progressive virtue, by the search
> Can be attained, a better sanctuary
> From doubt and sorrow, than the senseless grave?"

(*The Excursion* III. 212-29)

Sounding the affecting notes of the Immortality Ode, there is a sickened and sickening sense that age can only corrupt. Childhood becomes the only and temporary place of refuge, where imaginative questioning avails the human mind nothing. Death

and “the senseless grave” become the closest thing to “a better sanctuary,” as the Solitary’s despair propels him into passionate speech. The Solitary’s questions are both a problem and the source of the poem’s energy at this point of the poem, but while these questions disturb the poetry, they are not shown to be wrong. They become the crux of what Shelley would re-stage and re-debate in *The Triumph of Life*, where the impassioned cry, “Then, what is Life?” (*The Triumph of Life*, 544) becomes the culmination of this frustrated line of questioning. But the Wanderer is not stirred by this speech. Though critics have read the Solitary variously as a version of Coleridge,[40] himself,[41] or Byron,[42] rather, Wordsworth seems to stage the specific impulse toward despair that cuts across humanity as a whole without completely demonizing nor nullifying its anguish. Instead, both the Solitary’s questioning and Wanderer’s response come under scrutiny. Though Edward Bostetter rightly refers to the Solitary as a “formidable opponent” to any untried meliorism or religious orthodoxy,[43] the Wanderer seems not to register such an understanding of the world as a threat to his system:

> “Is this,” the grey-haired Wanderer mildly said,
> “The voice, which we so lately overheard,
> To that same Child, addressing tenderly
> The Consolations of a hopeful mind?
> ‘*His body is at rest, his soul in heaven.*’
> These were your words; and, verily, methinks
> Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop
> Than when we soar.”—

(*The Excursion* III. 230-7)

Responding "mildly," the power of the Solitary's words is left unchecked. Chiding the Solitary with his own comforting words to the child, the Wanderer insists on wisdom as a grounded rather than lofty virtue, spinning the Solitary's painful nihilism into his own homespun advice on how best to live. Such a gambit sponsors Hickey's sense of *The Excursion*'s questions: "[c]an imagination teach? Can it be taught? Or can it no longer be called imagination once it is tied to a didactic function?"[44] Shelley took up these questions as he forged his own version of the Solitary's despair and the Wanderer's response in *The Triumph of Life*.

The Triumph of Life immediately inhabits a liminal position, where vision, untold thoughts, and dreams become the fabric of the poetry. Offering a similar dialogic structure and a sense of possible psychomachia by setting up the speaker and Rousseau as both struggling to account for and deal with the visions they experience, Shelley weaves his poem out of the question of life's meaning and possibilities but with an increased urgency and a shared sense of terror. Just as the Solitary described the inevitable failure to find a "better sanctuary" or "a yielding element" (III. 228, 219), Shelley envisions the "sacred few" or those "who could not tame / Their spirits to the conquerors" (*The Triumph of Life*, 128, 129) as fleeing life in favor of their "native moon" in a significant glance to Plato's *Timaeus*, where good men are allowed to return to their "native star."[45] Death is not necessarily, in *The Triumph of Life*, a "senseless grave" (III. 229). Shelley presents it as "[d]ear, and yet dearer for its mystery" ("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," 12), a seductive possibility that cannot quite be glimpsed by the desirous speaker. Yet it is the dialogue between Rousseau and the speaker that sees Shelley refine Wordsworth's poetics with linguistic flare and critical precision. After hearing Rousseau relate the procession of pain, where he

outlines the torment and subjugation of "those spoilers spoiled" (*The Triumph of Life*, 235), Shelley's speaker, rather than "mildly" responding with a philosophy prepared to undermine Rousseau's vision as the Wanderer had to the Solitary's speech, is moved by the spectacle, offering a sickened sympathy for that which he witnesses secondhand.

—… "Let them pass,"

I cried, "—the world and its mysterious doom

"Is not so much more glorious than it was

That I desire to worship those who drew

New figures on its false and fragile glass

"As the old faded."— "Figures ever new

Rise on the bubble, paint them as you may;

We have but thrown, as those before us threw,

"Our shadows on it as it passed away.

(*The Triumph of Life*, 243-51)

Impassioned accents dominate even this most apparently despairing of cries. The aphoristic power of the lines sees artistic triumph snatched from the jaws of defeated disenchantment. In *The Triumph of Life*, art stands for a "stay against confusion,"[46] not momentary as Robert Frost had it, but a competing value that offers a possibility beyond nihilism. For there is a glory in the agony, where the lines achieve a tragic resonance that goes far beyond the emptiness proclaimed by the disenchanted content of the words. Rousseau interjects, interacting with rather than reacting against the

despair, insisting that the speaker recognize that life demands that such figures rise and fade, but that such shadows possess a meaning and value. Unlike what Jonathan Farina typifies as the "anonymous and flat" characters of *The Excursion*,[47] both Rousseau and Shelley's speaker are individuated despite their overlapping similarities, and they respond to, interrupt, and sympathize with one another. This is dynamic dialogue rather than series of monologues that characterize the structure of *The Excursion*.

The power of poetry becomes the vital point of contact between Rousseau and Shelley, as Shelley recalls Wordsworth's earlier emphasis on the influence of art. Shelley follows Wordsworth's preoccupation in *The Excursion*, where the poem suffers and enjoys a fretful relationship with how art guides its audience. The discovery of Voltaire's *Candide* in the Solitary's home provokes the Wanderer to condemn the novel that seems curiously fitted to its reader as

> this dull product of a Scoffer's pen,
> Impure conceits discharging from a heart
> Hardened by impious pride!

(II. 510-2).

In *The Triumph of Life*, Rousseau is forced to confront the reception of his own work. With the strut of a boast, Rousseau claims, "If I have been extinguished, yet there rise / A thousand beacons from the spark I bore" (*The Triumph of Life* 206-7), before the specter of regret rises:

> [I] Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!
> "And so my words have seeds of misery—
> "Even as the deeds of others." —"Not as theirs,"

(*The Triumph of Life*, 278-81).

Conjuring only to deform Shelley's earlier hope that the "ashes and sparks" of his poetry could become the "trumpet of a prophecy" ("Ode to the West Wind," 67, 69), Rousseau's is a pride rooted in his literary power, despite its pernicious effects. But where Wordsworth chooses to see *The Excursion* as a means to "ensure his literary survival,"[48] where the "The Poet's function… is to memorialize an evanescent human legacy," [49] Shelley's ambition is to move the role of the poet from mimetic memorializer to imaginative visionary. If, as William Galperin senses, the Poet is a "arguably a cipher whose only purpose is to recall events and conversations and to occasionally transcribe narratives none of which concern him directly, save perhaps in Book I,"[50] Shelley forces the role of the poet to seize imaginative power along with poetic responsibility, embodying the potency he claims for art in his formal choices in *The Triumph of Life*.

Such a departure from Wordsworth's example should not downplay the absolute importance of *The Excursion* to Shelley's career. That Shelley so frequently returned to *The Excursion* as a point to departure far beyond 1814 for his philosophical, poetic, and intellectual preoccupations suggests its centrality to his poetic thought. Jane Stabler rightly shows that "Percy Shelley was dismayed by Wordsworth's submission to the establishment, but he managed to compartmentalize its effects."[51] Though Shelley might not have completely affirmed with Keats in his letter to Haydon that "there are three things to rejoice at in this Age – The Excursion Your Pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of Taste,"[52] his troubled though profound response to the poem sees Shelley make Wordsworth's *Excursion* his own.

[1] Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 1. 25
[2] Quoted from *Critical Writings by Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1996), 64.
[3] Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).
[4] Jeffrey N. Cox, "Cockney Excursions," *The Wordsworth Circle* 42.2 (2011): 107.
[5] Stuart Peterfreund, *Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 56.
[6] Michael O'Neill, "Ebb and Flow in *The Excursion*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014), 93.
[7] Letter to Henry Crabb Robinson, 24 June 1817, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, arranged and ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970), 394.
[8] Greg Kucich, in *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University P, 1991).
[9] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). All Shelley's poetry (except *Laon and Cythna*) and prose (except the letters) will be cited from this edition unless specified otherwise.
[10] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones (2 vols.; Oxford, 1964), 2. 71n. Hereafter, *Letters: PBS*.
[11] Leigh Hunt, *The Examiner*, February 1, 1818, no. 527, 75-6; February 22, no. 530, 121-2; March 1, 1818, no. 531, 139-41, in James E. Barcus, ed. *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 110.
[12] John Taylor Coleridge, review, *The Quarterly Review*, April 1819, xxi, 460-71, in Barcus, 125.
[13] Andrew Hubbell "'Laon and Cythna': A Vision of Regency Romanticism," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 51 (2002): 175-6.
[14] Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), 100.
[15] Cronin, 100.
[16] See John Donovan, "Incest in *Laon and Cythna*: Nature, Custom, Desire," *Keats-Shelley Review* 2 (1987), 90.
[17] *Laon and Cythna* is quoted from *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Donald Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook, 3 vols. to date (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), 2. p. xvii. Hereafter *CPPBS* 3 with canto number and line numbers supplied.
[18] David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 176.
[19] Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric Of A Vision*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, [1948], 1973), 63.
[20] Baker, 81.
[21] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye with the assistance of David García, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2007). *The Excursion* will be quoted from this edition.
[22] Seamus Perry, "Coleridge's Disappointment in *The Excursion*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014): 149.

[23] Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's "Excursion"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 12.
[24] Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle; Washington: U of Washington P, 1963), 13.
[25] P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1980), 109.
[26] G. Kim Blank, *Wordsworth's Influence on Shelley: A Study of Poetic Influence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 29.
[27] O'Neill, 94.
[28] William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works, including* The Prelude*,* ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).
[29] William Galperin, "The Essential Reality of *The Excursion*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014): 114.
[30] Richard Gravil, "Is *The Excursion* a 'metrical Novel?'," *The Wordsworth Circle* 42.2 (2011): 145.
[31] Alexander Pope, *Major Works*, ed. with introd. and notes Pat Rogers, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).
[32] See, for example, *Alastor*, 639 or *Hellas*, 39. For the complete range of Shelley's use of "hope," see *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, compiled and arranged F. S. Ellis (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892; rpt. Johnson Reprint Company 1967), 335-6.
[33] Timothy Webb, "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*," *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1983), 57.
[34] William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 49.
[35] As suggested by Stuart Curran's chapter, "Composite Orders" in Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 181.
[36] F. L. Jones's footnote to these lines reads: *The Prelude*, xi. 136–44:

> Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
> Did *both* find helpers to their hearts' desire,
> And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish,—
> Were called upon to exercise their skill,
> Not in Utopia,—subterranean fields,—
> Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
> But in the very world*, which is the world*
> *Of all of us,—the place where, in the end,*
> *We find our happiness, or not at all!*

Lines 105–44 of The Prelude, xi, were first published in *The Friend* of 26 October 1809, and later in the collected edition of 1815, under the title "The French Revolution, As it appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement" (*Letters: PBS* 2. 406, n. 2. Footnote reproduced in its entirety).
[37] William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)," *William Wordsworth: The Major Works, including* The Prelude*,* ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).
[38] Blank, 65.
[39] Bostetter, 68.
[40] Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988), 150.

[41] Blank, 29; Kenneth R. Johnston, "Wordsworth's *Excursion*: Route and Destination," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014): 113.
[42] Jane Stabler, "Byron and *The Excursion*," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014): 142.
[43] Bostetter, 69.
[44] Hickey, 16.
[45] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. with an introd. and appendix by Desmond Lee ([1977] London: Penguin, 1987), 58.
[46] Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007), 132.
[47] Jonathan Farina, "*The Excursion* and 'The Surfaces of Things'," *The Wordsworth Circle* 45.2 (2014): 99.
[48] Matthew Clarke, "'Fit though Few': Anxiety and Ideology in Wordsworth's Excursion Quarto," *Studies in Romanticism* 55.2 (2016): 257.
[49] James Mulvihill, "The Last Woman in Wordsworth's *Excursion*," *English Studies* 95.8 (2014): 881.
[50] William Galperin, "'Imperfect While Unshared': The Role of the Implied Reader in Wordsworth's *Excursion*," *Criticism* 22.3 (1980): 194.
[51] Stabler, "Byron and *The Excursion*," 138.
[52] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958), 1. 203.