Shelley's Living Artistry: The Poetry and Drama of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Introduction: 'A poem is the very image of life'

'The poet & the man are of two different natures' (*PBS: Letters* II. p. 310) writes Shelley in a letter to John Gisborne, drawing a line that, as Byron mournfully noted in his letter to Hobhouse that precedes canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 'every one seemed determined not to perceive'.[1] Yet, in the case of Shelley, such a clear distinction between the poet and the man, the art and the life, seems unusually misrepresentative. Though the boundary between life and art is often a fraught question for poets and their critics, Shelley's oeuvre is fascinated by and explorative of the ways in which the man's life can form, to varying degrees in each work, the raw material for the poet's art. However, to discuss the life of the poet and its effect on his work threatens to raise the spectre of crude biographical criticism, and critics such as Timothy Webb have alerted readers to the dangers attendant on such readings: 'Therefore, just as it is wrong for the critic to appraise the poem in the light of the private life of the poet, so it is wrong for the poet to introduce his personal idiosyncrasies or his private griefs into his poetry, insofar as they remain merely personal or private'.[2] Apparently definitive in its injunction against the life being used to analyse the art, Webb's comment leaves open the significant caveat that the poet may include such themes in his work as long as they are not 'merely personal or private'.

This concession suggests a key source of the awakening, jolting, almost transgressive power of Shelley's poetry; Shelley transmutes the dross of the personal into the gold of art. The life cannot be banished from the poetry, but the artistic treatment of life means that Shelley's personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts never degenerate into 'merely personal or private' musings. Shelley's poetic daring lies in troubling the distinction between poetry as aesthetic work hermetically sealed against 'any thing human or earthly' (*Letters: PBS* II, p. 363) and poetry as a record of the emotional life

[1] Lord George Gordon Byron, 'To John Hobhouse, Esq.', *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed., introd. and notes by Jerome McGann, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 146

[2] Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 63.

of the poet. The repeated slippage between the emotional and personal life of the poet and his aesthetic and eternal preoccupations is a defining yet never fully definable signature of Shelley's work. It is this slippage and its expressive yield that the present monograph proposes to trace. Shelley's poetry gives us the sense of watching someone transform lived experience into poetry. I emphasise that this is an effect. However, by looking at the letters in relation to the poetry, I hope to carry out something of a controlled experiment in the difficult, exciting area of thinking about how a major poet dramatizes and complicates the idea of poetry as personal expression. I do not overlook the fact that letters themselves can be regarded as aesthetic creations, subject to displacements and reworkings in the same way that poems can be. Indeed, sometimes a poem may strike the reader as more unguardedly confessional than a letter. But setting letters side by side with cognate poems allows us to examine, as one weaves backwards and forwards between the two, Shelley's characteristic ways of 'writing the self', and it allows us, too, to arrive at a more considered judgement about his achievement in both forms of expression.

Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes proclaim that ''Romantic biography lives', detailing the plethora of biographies released in the decades preceding their collection of essays.[3] The popularity of the Romantic biography shows no sign of abating. Though attention to the representation of the poet's life in their art thrusts any academic study into dangerous territory, such attention is vital to any study of Shelley's poetry.[4] 'Leavis's objection…' as Timothy Webb shrewdly summarizes, is to 'Shelley's dangerous self-regard, a kind of monstrous egotism in which Percy B. Shelley is the focus of all attention';[5] yet rather than reject Leavis's charge in its entirety, I will show Shelley's poetry to be deeply interested in the self, but most significantly, to be highly self-conscious with regards to the presentation of and use of the self in his work. Such self-consciousness with regard to the relationship between biography and poetry was not unusual in the Romantic period. The tensions between art and life were vexed, with William Wordsworth, in his letter to James Gray, insisting that '[o]ur business is with their books,—to understand and to enjoy them', even as he

[3] Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes, 'Introduction: Romanticizing Biography', *Romantic Biography*, ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. xi (pp. xi-xvii).
[4] Judith Chernaik insists on this in *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland, UH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972), esp. p. 6.
[5] Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, p. 38.

writes of Robert Burns that '[n]either the subjects of his poems, nor his manner of handling them, allow us long to forget their author'.[6] Wordsworth's pained and apparently contradictory stance derives from both his sense of the injustice of the slurs against Burns and his awareness of himself as another poet who could be described in these terms: '[o]n basis of his human character he has reared a poetic one'.[7] But Wordsworth's description speaks to Shelley's art, where the poet 'has reared a poetic' self on the back of the biographical man 'that sits down to breakfast' with serious artistic intent,[8] and reveals how far Shelley seeks to learn from and individuate Wordsworth's own creation of a poetic self. The sculpting of a poetic self from the marble of the living man's life and dreams is fundamental to Shelley's imaginative project.

Daniel Robinson's study of *The Prelude* rightly emphasises how Wordsworth 'learned that composition—his preferred term for "writing"—is conversion in the act, happening again, over and over. It is renewed life —again and always'. Robinson reveals that for the older poet, creativity occurs 'when the past becomes present in the act of representing memory as past'.[9] For Shelley, it is not the problem of the older self recollecting and redrawing the earlier self, but rather, it is the conscious artist drawing upon the experiences and ideas of the man that animates the poetry. Shelley wrote that the man and the poet 'exist together [but] they may be unconscious of each other, & incapable of deciding upon each other's powers & effects by any reflex act. —' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 310). The 'may be' introduces a treacherous note of ambiguity that registers the difficulty of defining and thereby circumscribing the nature of the interaction between poet and man. Stuart Sperry describes 'the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of reconciling the microcosm and the macrocosm, art and life',[10] and Shelley's alertness to this challenge drives the poetry into exploring the different facets of how the life might be creative or restrictive of, or many shades in between

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[6] 'William Wordsworth, 'A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns (1816), to James Gray, Esq., Edinburgh', *William Wordsworth: The Major Works, including* The Prelude, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 668 and p. 669 (pp. 663-675).
[7] Wordsworth, A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns (1816), p. 669.
[8] W. B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for My Work', *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 509 (pp. 509-526).
[9] Daniel Robinson, *Myself & Some Other Being: Wordsworth and the Life Writing* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014), p. 21 and p. 33.
[10] Stuart Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 176.

these polarities, of poetry. Michael O'Neill shows that across the poetry of the Romantic period, 'the self is reconceived, yet it remains on speaking terms with a suffering, experiencing person' and quotes René Wellek and Austin Warren's point that the 'work of art may rather embody the "dream" of an author than his actual life'.[11] As such, it is not simply happenings in the life that inform Shelley's art, but his poetic treatment of the life, his 'dream' of his life, and his profound artistic control over the chaos of the personal that render the relationship between Shelley's life and art so 'vitally metaphorical' (*A Defence*, p. 676).

Rather than focus on biography per se, this study focuses on Shelley's letters as a major source of the poet's reports of his life and preoccupations to examine his transmutation of his written 'life' into his poetic 'art'. What Shelley reports in his letters, he alters, aestheticizes, and omits from his poetry, even as the life remains in tantalizing touching distance from his poetry. Letters form the bridge between the personal and the poetic, and this study includes as a major emphasis an examination of ways in which Shelley's personal letters offer suggestive insights into his art. Although I concur with Mary A. Favret's shrewd argument that '[w]e accept too readily the notion that the letter allows us a window into the intimate, and usually feminine, self',[12] the personal quality of the letters remains striking, and this monograph places the relationship between individual private letters and the artistic work under scrutiny. Shelley's reputation has suffered from both the praise of his admirers and the censure of his detractors. From Matthew Arnold's depiction of Shelley as 'a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain',[13] to the Tory reviewer who wrote after his premature death, 'Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry, has been drowned: now he knows whether there is a God or no',[14] Shelley has attracted passionate approbation or denunciations. This book makes no attempt to sit in judgement of the poet's character. Rather, it will bear witness to the aesthetic and philosophical power of Shelley's poetry, revealing the difficult and

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[11] Michael O'Neill, '"The Tears Shed or Unshed": Romantic Poetry and Questions of Biography', *Romantic Biography*, ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes, p. 8 (pp. 1-17); René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 3rd edition, 1963), p. 78, quoted in O'Neill, '"The Tears Shed or Unshed": Romantic Poetry and Questions of Biography', p. 5.
[12] Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 10.
[13] Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960–1977), XI. p. 327.
[14] Quoted in Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 730.

mobile, though vitally significant interaction between the life, as revealed in the letters, and the poetry. This study, through its focus on the emotional and intellectual life of the poet found in the letters and their interaction with the poetry, attempts to provide a view of the poetry that explores the intricate and fertile relationship between the personal and the poetic. The importance of Shelley's life as found in the letters for the poetry offers a fuller consideration of Shelley's poetic achievement. This study provides a long overdue reassessment of how the personal might inform the poetry of Shelley.

Art remains the focus of the study; letters form the personal backdrop. I follow Gerard Genette in perceiving that 'we can use the correspondence of an author (any author)—and this is indeed what specialists do—as a certain kind of statement about the history of each of his works: about its creation, publication, and reception by the public and critics, and about his view of the work at all stages of this history'.[15] The carefully open claim for the value of letters implied by 'a certain kind of statement' suggests Genette's awareness of the different epistolary techniques of each writer, each letter, and each kind of connection between the letter and the poetry, an awareness that I have brought to my readings of Shelley's poetry, as letters, to a greater or a lesser extent, become the grist to Shelley's poetic mill. Shelley's letters, in their variety, where Shelley attunes himself to different addressees, meditates on art, or performs more domestic tasks, mimic the protean character of his poetry and drama. This study reads the letters and their biographical contexts to shed light on the poetry, revealing the variety of guises adopted by the poet to trace the ambiguous and shifting relationship between the art and life.

Chapter one, '"Painted fancy's unsuspected scope:" The *Esdaile Notebook, Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things*, and *Queen Mab*' begins by looking at Shelley's letter to Elizabeth Hitchener of 16 October 1811, written while composing the *Esdaile Notebook* and as he composed his epic, *Queen Mab*. It was to Hitchener that Shelley wrote some of his most intense letters, where philosophical, religious, and personal beliefs, along with promises, affirmations of affection, and plans were condensed into

[15] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin and foreword by Richard Macksey, Literature, Culture, Theory 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 374.

their exchange. The *Esdaile Notebook, Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things*, and *Queen Mab* see Shelley careen through all of these positions, and the letter's gamut of ideas and preoccupations speak directly to those displayed artistically in *Esdaile Notebook* and *Queen Mab*. In these early poems, Shelley self-consciously presents to the reader his transition into a mature artist, and the letter reveals the dazzling quality of Shelley's ambition and conceptions that are carefully concentrated and refined in the contemporaneous poetry. Chapter two, '"These transient meetings:" *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna',* reveals Shelley's self-conscious attempt to fashion a portrait of the poet's mind as it develops. His letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, written at the end of August in 1815 shows Shelley ruminating on the story to which he returns in *Alastor*, where the letter to Mary Godwin of 28 October 1814, I argue, contains 'idealized self-portraits' of the lovers that are transfigured into art in *Laon and Cythna*.[16] Experimenting with the boundaries between art and life, *Alastor* and *Laon and Cythna* show Shelley's artistry begin to reveal his interest in transforming the dross of the self 'in his bathrobe' into the gold of selves rendered into art.[17]

Chapter three, which explores the relationship between Shelley's letter to Thomas Love Peacock of 22 July 1816 and the Scrope Davies Notebook, shows Shelley in a different position to his usual letter-writing persona. Writing a travelogue letter that seems directed to the wider public as much as it is to Peacock, Shelley blurs the line that Genette draws between public and private letter writing: 'what will define this character [of a private rather than public epitext] is the presence of a first addressee (a correspondent, a confidant, the author himself) who is perceived not just as an intermediary or functionally transparent relay, a media "nonperson," but indeed as a full-fledged addressee, one whom the author addresses for that person's own sake even if the author's ulterior motive is to let the public subsequently stand witness to this interlocution'.[18] Shelley is writing for an addressee who moves between being an 'intermediary' and 'full-fledged addressee' at different points in the letter, but this slippage makes the letter more rather than less intriguing. Intimately connected with the poetry of the Scrope Davies Notebook, the letter insists on its status as a literary text in its own right even as it seems supplementary to the poetry itself, which is the

[16] Judith Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972), p. 9.
[17] Zola, quoted in Genette, p. 373
[18] Genette, p. 371.

major site of Shelleyan artistry. Chapter four, '"That such a man should be such a poet!:" "To Wordsworth," "Verses Written on Receiving a Celandine in a Letter from England," and *Julian and Maddalo*' discusses Shelley's poetic and epistolary relationship with his peers, Wordsworth and Byron, showing, in both cases, Shelley's awareness of the differences as much as the likeness between their lives and their poetry. The 2 August 1816 entry in a journal letter to Peacock sees Shelley express his deep ambivalence with regards to Wordsworth, and the chapter witnesses the self-conscious tension displayed in Shelley's poetic response to his older peer. Shelley's letter to Byron of April 28, 1818, demonstrates Shelley's tactful urbanity in relation to Byron's paternity of Allegra. This urbanity becomes the hallmark of *Julian and Maddalo,* where Shelley teasingly suggests even as he refuses to cast himself and Byron as the titular characters of his dialogue poem in any unambiguous fashion. Shelley's deepening poetic maturity shows him experiment with incorporating but transforming life into the poetry to render it 'a highly wrought *piece of art*' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 294).

Chapter 5, '"In a style very different': *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*', reads Shelley's plays as bound together through their exploration of freedom and tyranny. The letter to Thomas Love Peacock of 6 November 1818 shows Shelley detailing an intriguing response to tyranny by meditating on Tasso's imprisonment at the hands of the Duke of Ferrara. Both plays, despite their obvious differences, show Shelley fascinated with embodying power struggle in language. Politics and aesthetics become inseparable in Shelley's artistic vision, and the chapter reveals how such issues nuance and complicate his finest poetic and dramatic work. Chapter 6, '"The sacred talisman of language:" *The Witch of Atlas* and *A Defence of Poetry*', offers a reading of Shelley's letter to a Lady, written in the spring of 1821, to reveal the leap in sophistication from the letter compared to *The Witch of Atlas* and *A Defence,* where Shelley's imaginative works outsoar his epistolary address to his correspondent. In his letter to an unknown woman, Shelley's advice on writing bespeaks the deep seriousness of his approach to language, and this chapter considers the way in which such concerns reach their highest expression in *The Witch of Atlas* and *A Defence of Poetry*. This chapter demonstrates the continuities between *A Defence of Poetry* and *The Witch of Atlas,* showing these works to contain some of Shelley's most profound statements on poetry and poetics.

Chapter 7, '"One is always in love with something or other:" *Epipsychidion* and the Jane Poems', focuses on Shelley's letter to John Gisborne of June 18 1822, a letter which moves between several different topics, modes, and tones to reveal a portrait of the difficulties of Shelley's life. Lingering on a discussion of his artistic works and his evenings with the Williams, Shelley provides a précis of *Epipsychidion* that almost seeks to perform a rupture between himself and the poem. In the same letter, Shelley sketches an image of himself listening to Jane's music that suggests the biographical grounding of his poems for her. Both *Epipsychidion* and Shelley's poems to Jane Williams show Shelley experiment, with exhilarating self-awareness, with the boundaries of art and life. Though Andrew Elfenbein identifies a key problem that dogs the critic who would investigate such a connection: 'Seamless moves between letters and poems are everywhere in Romantic literary criticism, even though (leaving Foucault aside) equating the author of a literary text with the author of a personal letter is sloppy thinking'.[19] Yet, particularly in the context of *Epipsychidion* and the Jane poems, to ignore or avoid the letters so as to evade the charge of 'sloppy thinking' becomes a form of negligence. The critic, like the artist, cannot ignore the conditions of the poet's life even as Shelley's artistry reconfigures and redraws the actual in his poetry. Chapter 8, '"The right road to Paradise:" *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*', considers these poems as the crowning achievement of Shelley's career. The chapter reads Shelley and Keats's 1820 letters as the most significant influence on *Adonais,*[20] where Shelley almost seems to craft his elegy as a response to their mutual advice. Read in this light, I argue that the poem cannot be dismissed as a narcissistic effusion, but that it must be understood as Shelley's tribute to his lost peer. Shelley's letter to John Gisborne of 10 April 1822 reveals how *The Triumph of Life* shapes itself from a meditation on the poetry and art of Shelley's fellow artists, particularly in the conflict that Shelley creates between Goethe and Wordsworth's poetics. Shelley's life as he reveals or veils it in his letters becomes the fertile ground where the debates, which inflect *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, germinate.

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[19] Andrew Elfenbein, 'How to Analyze a Correspondence: The Example of Byron and Murray', *European Romantic Review* 22.3 (2011), p. 347 (pp. 347–355).

[20] '*Adonais*, thus, needs to read in the context of the *Defence* and of Shelley's response to Keats during 1820 and 1821'. Jeffrey N. Cox, 'Keats, Shelley, and the Wealth of the Imagination', *Studies in Romanticism* 34.3 (1995), p. 391 (pp. 365-400).

The distinctiveness of Shelley's work comes to rest on its wrong-footing of any neat division of life and art. The dazzling intensity of his poetry and dramas lies in its refusal to separate the twain as Shelley explores and finally explodes the boundaries between what is personal and what is poetic. Despite Webb's salutary sense of 'the complicated and dangerous ways in which biography and criticism can interlace',[21] this study seeks to examine the intricacy with which Shelley mingles his art with his life. Foreshadowing Eliotic and Yeatsian anxieties about the status of the poet in relation to his poetry, Shelleyan daring finds its fullest expression in the manner in which life and art come to encroach upon yet fuel one another:

> Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
> Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
> Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
> Burning, yet ever inconsumable:
> In one another's substance finding food,
> Like flames too pure and light and unimbued
> To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,
> Which point to Heaven and cannot pass away:

(*Epipsychidion*, 576-83)

For Shelley, both life and art 'are transfigured' by their relationship with one another where the 'poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 677) but is equally bound up with and formed by the society in which he lives and the past that he inherits. A central paradox of *A Defence of Poetry* is Shelley's insistence that the 'poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth', where time and eternity seem to clash. Yet his poetry becomes the exegesis of this element of his prose essay as his work enacts the rich, shifting, and complex relationship between ephemerality of life and the eternity of art. Poetry is made out of the stuff of life, where the poet's artistry is to make the spheres touch and mingle before being transfigured into 'the artifice of eternity'.[22] Yeats's yearning phrase, which longs for that which it cannot achieve, suggests something of Shelley's desire to draw upon life's 'dome of many-coloured glass' (*Adonais*, 52. 462) and make it part of art's 'white radiance' (*Adonais*, 52. 463), and the difficulty and complexity of

[21] Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, p. 3.

[22] W. B. Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', III. 8, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. with introd. by Daniel Albright, Everyman's Library (London: J. M. Dent, 1992), p. 240.

the endeavour valorises and animates his poetry. Shelley's living artistry seeks to bring experience into poetry without ever losing sight of poetry's freedom from all that would explain its genesis.

Standard Abbreviations and Note on Texts

CPPBS *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Donald Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 3 vols to date. 2000, 2004, 2012.

The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1957).
All quotations from the Bible will be from this edition.

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

Major Works *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Chapters 1 to 4 will quote Shelley's poetry from *CPPBS*, and chapters 5 to 8 will use *Major Works* for quotations from Shelley's poetry and plays. All quotations from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, *On Life*, *Philosophical View of Reform*, and *On Love* will be from *Major Works*.

5. 'In a style very different': *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*

Prometheus Unbound and *The Cenci* are the high watermark of Shelley's *annus mirabilis*. Earl Wasserman views them as representing 'the antinomies of the skeptical contest as it was waged in Shelley's own mind',[23] and the letters create a similar sense of the pair of dramas as representing binaries, with *Prometheus Unbound* firmly demarcated as for 'the elect' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 200) where *The Cenci* is 'calculated to produce a very popular effect' (*Letters: PBS* II. pp. 116-117). Despite this apparent division, where popularity appears to be associated with 'sad reality' (Dedication to *The Cenci*, p. 314) and the poetry of the elect aligned with 'beautiful idealisms' (Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, p. 232), Shelley does not offer unfettered idealism in *Prometheus Unbound*, nor does he merely depict 'sad reality' in *The Cenci*. The letters create a difficult doubling between the poetical dramas,[24] and Shelley's letter to Thomas Love Peacock of 6 November 1818 in particular offers a suggestive perspective through its fascination with the poet's response to tyranny. Shelley's preoccupation with embodying power struggle in language remains constant in *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

Shelley's letter to Peacock, written during his composition of *Prometheus Unbound* and prior to writing *The Cenci*, sees him relate his visit to the public library in Ferrara cathedral. His primary fascination was with Ariosto and Tasso's writings (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 46), but Shelley lingered over Tasso's desperate entreaties to his jailor, the Duke of Ferrara: 'There is something irresistibly pathetic to me in the sight of Tasso's own hand writing moulding expressions of adulation & entreaty to a deaf & stupid tyrant in an age when the most heroic virtue would have exposed its possessor to hopeless persecution, and—such is the alliance between virtue & genius—which unoffending genius could not escape.—' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) This preoccupation with the poet's attempt to survive tyrannical authority is mirrored in Shelley's imaginative writing. The tensions in both *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* centre on the poet's role in a world where powerful authority figures persecute their victims,

[23] Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 128.
[24] Jean Hall links the dramas by means of 'the link between social behavior and the imagination' (p. 339). See Jean Hall, 'The Socialized Imagination: Shelley's "The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound', *Studies in Romanticism* 23.3 (1984), pp. 339-350.

with Beatrice Cenci delineating society as divided between these binaries: 'What a world we make / The oppressor and the oppressed' (*The Cenci* 5. 3. 75-76). Meditations about authority and power are not quarantined in *The Cenci*;[25] *Prometheus Unbound* wrestles with the same questions. Though Prometheus has been identified as a poet by Daniel Hughes,[26] Beatrice has not been treated as such. Yet, as Frederick Kirchhoff writes, 'Shelley's customary use of "poetry" does not restrict the term to verbal artifacts',[27] and, just as the Poet of *Alastor* does not write poetry but retains his status as a poet, Beatrice's 'imagination and sensibility' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 318) promote her to the same level. Language and silence are markers that have the potential to overcome or enumerate the wrongs done to the dispossessed. Prometheus and Beatrice Cenci, like Tasso, are forced to appeal to, kill, or overthrow 'deaf & stupid tyrant[s]', and as for Tasso, language is the medium in which they must operate. Shelley's letter to Peacock underpins both of his dramas, which explore the role of the poet through Beatrice Cenci's and Prometheus' sustained questioning of the self and world in language.

The Cenci's 'Dedication to Leigh Hunt Esq.' immediately casts the play as a new venture for Shelley, not merely in terms of a foray into dramatic writing, but as a move away from his previous self-proclaimed tendency to 'impersonate my own apprehensions' ('Dedication', p. 314) in favour of representing 'sad reality' in his play ('Dedication', p. 314). Claiming embodiment rather than impersonation as his new mode, Shelley's letters also show him attempting to convince his reader that these dramas representing a turning point in his career. Shelley's pride in *Prometheus Unbound*, where he writes to Thomas Love Peacock that '[i]t is a drama, with characters & mechanism of a kind yet unattempted; & I think the execution is better than any of my former attempts'. (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 94), and his sense that *The Cenci* could help him attain the renown he desired, display confidence in his new direction. But, in his Dedication, Shelley spends his subsequent paragraphs commending Hunt's

[25] '*The Cenci* was written between the Third and Fourth Acts of *Prometheus Unbound.* The tragedy of Beatrice will here be regarded as a pyrrhonistic exercise in aid of the affirmation celebrated by Shelley's lyrical drama'. James Rieger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York, NY: George Brazillier, 1967), p. 112.
[26] Daniel Hughes, 'Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of "Prometheus Unbound"', *Studies in Romanticism* 17.1 (1978), pp. 3-11.
[27] Frederick Kirchhoff, 'Shelley's "Alastor": The Poet Who Refuses to Write Language', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 32 (1983), p. 111, n.6 (pp. 108-122).

political radicalism, in particular, Hunt's 'patient and irreconcilable enmity with domestic and political tyranny and imposture' (Dedication to *The Cenci*, p. 314). Such implacable opposition to tyranny mirrors Shelley's own hopes of resistance and Beatrice Cenci's similar refusal to comply with despotic rule. Their resistance to oppression binds the three figures together. Beatrice, Shelley, and Hunt represent a challenge to oppressive structures of society that would blacken their names and deny them liberty, and indeed life, in the case of Beatrice Cenci. Yet, rather than suggesting that these three alone struggle against tyranny, Shelley's letter to Peacock suggests a nascent sense of the poet as 'unacknowledged legislator of the world' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 701), who contends, if ineffectually, against his oppressor. Tasso's 'unoffending genius could not escape' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) the cruelty of a powerful, though lesser mind, just as Shelley, Hunt, and Beatrice are victimised by 'domestic and political tyranny' (Dedication to *The Cenci*, p. 314). *The Cenci* is no mere apologia for Beatrice or an abstract display of the 'error' of her parricide.[28] Rather, the play reveals how 'the most heroic virtue [would have] exposed its possessor to hopeless persecution' as Beatrice becomes poet as Count Cenci seeks to destroy her 'virtue & genius' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47).

Though intended as a mockery of Shelley and his play, Charles Kingsley's identification of Shelley and his heroine offers a valuable insight into Shelley's dramatic impetus: '...in spite of all that has been said to the contrary, Beatrice Cenci is really none other than Percy Bysshe Shelley himself in petticoats...'[29] Ginger Strand and Sarah Zimmerman rightly sense that this 'represents a telling identification on a critic's part of playwright with heroine',[30] but the preface to *The Cenci*, with its refusal of deadening didacticism in favour of a proclamation of the importance of the imagination, moves the terms of identification from personal to poetic. For Michael O'Neill, '[w]hen art emerges in the Preface as the true religion—"Imagination is as

[28] 'She could have "gone out of herself" in her thinking sufficiently to comprehend the uncertain and multi-leveled otherness-from-himself in her father-adversary. Then she could have responded in kind to that sense of him rather than imitating the Count's apparent posture of self-determination underwritten by God's Will'. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 154.
[29] Anon. [Charles Kingsley?], 'Thoughts on Shelley and Byron', *Fraser's Magazine* 48 (November 1853), pp. 568-76 (p. 574), Quoted in Ginger Strand and Sarah Zimmerman, 'Finding an audience: Beatrice Cenci, Percy Shelley, and the Stage', *European Romantic Review* 6. 2 (1996), p. 246 (pp. 246-268).
[30] Strand and Zimmerman, p. 264.

the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion"—, the description implies a humanist equivalent to Christ's incarnation'.[31] Beatrice is a representation of the poet in her stand against tyranny, as she 'beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 677). The corruption of poets in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* by a tyrannical society is Beatrice's destruction at her father's hands writ large: '[f]or the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and therefore it is corruption. It begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralysing venom, through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which sense hardly survives.' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 687). Tainted by Cenci's oppressive and sadistic will, Beatrice, like Tasso, is corrupted into self-betrayal. Shelley's empathy for Tasso's suffering as he wrote adulatory poetry for the Duke of Ferrara: 'But to me there is so much more to pity than to condemn in these entreaties and praises of Tasso' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) reveals a depth of sympathy for the tortured mind of the poet rather than censure for Tasso's abject posture, just as Beatrice becomes more than an object to be exposed to the 'restless and anatomizing casuistry' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 317) of the audience.

The Cenci opens with Cenci's power affirmed despite being the author of 'manifold and hideous deeds' (*The Cenci*, 1.1. 13), and Cenci's swagger, as he points out that such 'deeds [which] are the stewards / Of their revenue' (*The Cenci*, 1.1. 32-33) confirms the complicity of the Church with his crimes. However, Camillo gestures to Beatrice's potential power over her father:

> *Camillo.*
> Where is your gentle daughter?
> Methinks her sweet looks, which make all things else
> Beauteous and glad, might kill the fiend within you.

(*The Cenci*, 1.1. 43-45)

Language and silence, as critics often notice, are at the heart of the play. Beatrice's 'sweet looks' unite these binaries as her voiceless gaze communicates directly with her audience. Camillo does not commit to the transformative character of her

[31] Michael O'Neill, 'Cathestant or Protholic?: Shelley's Italian Imaginings', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 6 (2001), p. 155 (pp. 153-168).

expressive eyes in the case of Cenci, but the potential for her to change him offers a clear sense of her possible power. Though Anne McWhir claims that '*The Cenci* is clearly a play about the effect of patriarchy on thought and language',[32] the threat to the patriarchy by Beatrice's thought and language is equally significant. Cenci's fear of the potent, though silent language of Beatrice's gaze sets the play in motion. With Beatrice firmly in his sights, Cenci lovingly details how he enjoys destroying his prey:

> *Cenci.*
>
> I the rather
>
> Look on such pangs as terror ill conceals,
>
> The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,
>
> Which tell me that the spirit weeps within
>
> Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ.
>
> I rarely kill the body which preserves,
>
> Like a strong prison, the soul within my power,
>
> Wherein I feed it with the breath of fear
>
> For hourly pain.

(*The Cenci*, 1. 1. 109-17)

Cenci seeks to crush the bodies and spirits of his victims, and his lingering description reveals his pleasure in causing the physical manifestations of terror that prove his destruction of the soul. The reference to Christ signals his depravity still further where His sacrifice is lost in an image of suffering separated from its meaning. Almost scientifically, Cenci observes the torments he creates and extends them by keeping the body alive only to 'feed it with the breath of fear'. Despite the breath-taking lack of humanity, Cenci is no mere pantomime villain. His description of himself as '[h]ardened' (*The Cenci*, 1.1. 94) recalls Shelley's characterisation of corruption as producing 'a torpid mass in which sense hardly survives' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 687). Self-corrupted, he seeks to transform Beatrice into his own image before she can transform him. Cenci is both the avatar of 'a theatrical character' and 'an evil counterpart of the poet who embodies imagination in language'.[33] Though Prometheus required Jupiter in order to become a capable poet, Beatrice is overcome

[32] Anne McWhir, 'The Light and the Knife: Ab/Using Language in *The Cenci*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 38 (1989), p. 145 (pp. 145-161).
[33] Hogle, *Shelley's Process*, p. 150; McWhir, p. 150.

by Cenci's evil being compounded by his domestic, then religious and political power over her: 'great God, / Whose image on earth a father is' (*The Cenci*, 2. 1. 16-17). 'Beatrice is not Prometheus',[34] and her status as poet can no more free her from her father than Tasso's genius could save him from 'a deaf & stupid tyrant' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47).

Beatrice's father is the representative of divine power on earth, and Shelley's musings on Tasso's sufferings as he seeks to flatter his way to freedom offer a parallel to Beatrice's powerlessness: 'It is as a Christian prays to {and} praises his God whom he knows to be the most remorseless capricious & inflexible of tyrants, but whom he knows also to be omnipotent' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47). Despite Beatrice's prayers, entreaties, and hope, she is condemned to suffer at the hands of his patriarchal power. Her attempt to resist the conflation of father and Father fail as she refuses to believe Cenci's tale of the death of her brothers:

> [LUCRETIA *sinks, half fainting;* BEATRICE *supports her*]
> It is not true!—Dear Lady, pray look up.
> Had it been true—there is a God in Heaven—
> He would not live to boast of such a boon.
> Unnatural man, thou knowest that it is false.

(*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 51-54)

Asking her mother to gaze up to heaven, Beatrice tries to deny that God, like her father, is 'the most remorseless capricious & inflexible of tyrants' but finds divine intervention lacking. Her statement, 'there is a God in Heaven', turns to plea as her fragile trust resides in the survival of her innocent kin. Calling him 'Unnatural man', Beatrice subconsciously makes Cenci more or less than human, echoing Shelley's presentation of him as more an evil abstraction than a rounded human character, as he departs from Shakespeare's humanising bent with even his most villainous characters. Bryan Weller sees *The Cenci* as a challenge to *King Lear*: 'In *The Cenci*, he creates a myth of paternal tyranny to counter Shakespeare's myth of filial ingratitude, and the inversion is mirrored at the centre of the drama'.[35] However, Shelley seems to be

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[34] Paul Endo, '*The Cenci*: Recognizing the Shelleyan Sublime', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38. 3/4, Romantic Performances (1996), p. 386 (pp. 379-397). See also Melvin R. Watson, 'Shelley and Tragedy: The Case of Beatrice Cenci', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 7 (1958), p. 14 (pp. 13-21).
35 Bryan Weller, 'Shelley, Shakespeare and the Binding of the Lyric', *Modern Language Notes* 93.5 (1978), p. 913 (pp. 912-37).

interested in Cenci as more than a merely bad father, but a figure of evil beyond human understanding and he flamboyantly parades his sickening deeds before shocked spectators. Rather than behaving as Shelley's 'Christian [who] prays to {and} praises his God', Beatrice denounces her father, god of her family, even as she continues to pray to God. Demanding help from the guests: 'Dare no one look on me? / None answer? Can one tyrant overbear / The sense of many best and wisest men?' (*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 132-34) Beatrice is isolated as none of the guests can bring themselves to make such a 'dangerous enemy' (*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 143). Beatrice's gaze becomes key to her reproach, and her challenge to the guests and her father centres on sight: 'Cover thy face from every living eye, / And start if thou but hear a human step;' (*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 154-55) Her curse on her company centres on their being watched by 'avenging looks' (*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 152) from her brother's ghosts and challenged by 'each living eye' (*The Cenci*, 1. 3. 154). Remorselessly anatomising them with the gaze so feared by Orsino, Beatrice challenges them with her scrutiny:

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

(*The Cenci*, 1. 2. 83-87)

Beatrice's ability to witness his crimes, and the sense of his inner self bared before her disturb Orsino, who fears her detailed, silent analysis, recalls Cenci's fear of being transformed by her 'sweet looks' (*The Cenci*, 1. 1. 44). Her gaze, expressive and challenging, becomes that which Cenci seeks to silence.

Cenci's rape of Beatrice, intended to pervert her spirit, is equally intended to destroy the power of her expressive gaze:

> *Cenci*. From this day and hour
> Never again, I think, with fearless eye,
> And brow superior, and unaltered cheek,
> And that lip made for tenderness or scorn,
> Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind;
> Me least of all. Now get thee to thy chamber!
> Thou too, loathed image of thy cursèd mother,

(*The Cenci*, 2. 1. 115-21)

Beatrice's power to silence tyrannical figures has been curtailed by her father's violence and her gaze and speech stripped of its potency. The careful judgment implicit in 'I think' suggests the calculated character of Cenci's assault. Without rashness or passion, Cenci sought to end Beatrice's moral ascendency. Cenci's description of Beatrice's face recalls Shelley's portrait of her in the preface to the play. Shelley spends an entire paragraph tracing Beatrice's character through her physiognomy, deducing her personality via the painter's presentation of his subject. Jane Stabler rightly points out that Shelley's female characters and Christ are linked through this ekphrastic analysis: 'Shelley's description of the painting [Corregio's Christ] is strikingly close to the ideal female figures of his imagination—Emilia in *Epipsychidion*, Beatrice in the portrait that inspired the *Cenci*, and the female figure in *The Triumph of Life* are ekphrastic creatures, "too gentle to be human" (1. 21)'.[36] Yet it also recalls the power of Leigh Hunt's portrait that had seemed to speak to Shelley while he wrote his dedication to *The Cenci*.[37] Praising Hunt's portrait, Shelley wrote of Hunt's influence over his drama: 'your portrait is before me, an admirable & faithful portrait of you, where everything is imitated but that deep & earnest sweetness within which the spirit of man's finest nature sometimes looks out of your eyes—your portrait is before me, & it smiles an imperfect approbation' (*Letters: PBS* II. pp. 96-97, n.1). The eloquence of Hunt's gaze that smiled on Shelley offers an important parallel in that Cenci aims to extinguish 'man's finest nature' in Beatrice. Beatrice's power is not that she is an 'ideal female figure[s]', as Stabler has it, but that she, like Hunt and Shelley himself, is a person of 'imagination and sensibility' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 318) that offers a dangerous challenge to Cenci and all forms of tyranny.

Alienating Beatrice from herself becomes Cenci's most deadly blow. Act three begins with Beatrice's agonising degradation as she tries to gather together the strands of herself, but her failure to recognise herself and her mother suggestively images the full horror of Cenci's assault:

> *Beatrice.* [*To LUCRETIA, in a slow, subdued voice*

[36] Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic and Victorian Writers in Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 99.

[37] Though Frederick Jones retains Shelley's given date for the dedicatory letter, he argues that it was written in Leghorn on 2 September 1819. See *Letters: PBS* II. p. 95, n.1.

Do you know
I thought I was that wretched Beatrice
Men speak of, whom her father sometimes hales
From hall to hall by the entangled hair;
At others, pens up naked in damp cells
Where scaly reptiles crawl, and starves her there
Till she will eat strange flesh. This woeful story
So did I overact in my sick dreams,
That I imagined…no, it cannot be!
Horrible things have been in this wild world,
Prodigious mixtures, and confusions strange
Of good and ill; and worse have been conceived
Than ever there was found a heart to do.
But never fancy imaged such a deed

(*The Cenci*, 3. 1. 42-55)

These self-described 'wild words' (*The Cenci*, 3. 1. 66) embody Beatrice's suffering. Shelley paints her as distanced from herself, rationalising her suffering as that of another's in her 'sick dreams'. Transforming her pain into a 'woeful story', Beatrice makes it into a horrible imagining rather than a memory. Only through distancing her speaking self from her suffering self can Beatrice begin to articulate her tormented memories, recalling Giacomo's description of the divorce of words from thought:

Giacomo. Ask me not what I think; the unwilling brain
Feigns often what it would not; and we trust
Imagination with such fantasies
As the tongue dares not fashion into words,
Which have no words, their horror makes them dim
To the mind's eye—

(*The Cenci*, 2. 2. 82-87)

The unsayable horror of Cenci's torment creates his control over his children. The imagination cannot body forth language as the images from which words should spring are dimmed. For both Giacomo and Beatrice, the imagination seems perverted into creating horrifying images that cannot be communicated. For Beatrice and Giacomo, to lose one's speech is to lose one's power. Cenci's desire to rob Beatrice of her expressive capacity seems fulfilled; like Giacomo, she is rendered incapable of

expressing her suffering to her audience. When Lucretia pleads for Beatrice to tell her the sufferings she has undergone, Beatrice cannot respond. Stephen Cheeke identifies this moment as the pivotal moment in the play: 'Her pathetic question: "What are the words which you would have me speak?" initiates a new phase of not-speaking by the play itself. Beatrice cannot name because Shelley cannot name'.[38] However, this is no 'new phase'. Cenci's campaign throughout the play has been to end Beatrice's expressive function, aiming to make her '[b]ody and soul a monstrous lump of ruin' (*The Cenci*, 4. 1. 95). At this juncture, it appears that Cenci has achieved his ends; Beatrice, like the rest of her family, cannot begin to articulate his torments, and lacking this capacity, she cannot free herself from them. Her gaze and language, and thereby, her 'imagination and sensibility' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 318) are silenced by the force of his violence.

Though some critics argue that Beatrice is deformed into a version of her father by reason of parricide and her subsequent refusal to confess her guilt while implicating her agents, Marzio and Olimpio, McWhir's judgement that, '[s]he is a woman using language as her father used it — to conform the world around her to her will' seems too strong.[39] Rejecting the false use of language that had formed the play's theme, Beatrice refuses to accept the nature of the crime that she has committed: 'Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord, / I am more innocent of parricide / Than is a child born fatherless' (*The Cenci*, 4. 4. 111-13). Following Cenci's self-characterisation as 'a fiend appointed to chastise / The offences of some unremembered world' (*The Cenci*, 4. 1. 161-62), Beatrice calmly rejects the charge of parricide, as he has been no father to her, even to the point of inhumanity. Like Shelley in his letter to Peacock, where he claims: 'You know I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present & tangible object' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47), Beatrice finds the manifestation of evil in her father's physical form. Beatrice once again achieves power through the recognition of the dangerous perversion of words from their meanings, and her gaze attains its earlier potency as she terrifies Marzio with her 'stern yet piteous look' (*The Cenci*, 5. 2. 109) in the courtroom:

Marzio. Oh!

[38] Stephen Cheeke, 'Shelley's "The Cenci": Economies of a "Familiar" Language', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 47 (1998), p. 152 (pp. 142-160).
[39] McWhir, p. 157.

Spare me! My brain swims round…I cannot speak…
It was that horrid torture forced the truth.
Take me away! Let her not look on me!
I am a guilty, miserable wretch!
I have said all I know; now, let me die!

(*The Cenci*, 5. 2. 88-92)

Beatrice destabilises Marzio's mind as he begs for punishment rather than being forced to submit to her continued anatomising gaze. Guilty before her 'innocent and pure' (*The Cenci*, 5. 3. 101) state, Marzio condemns himself to death. Despite the potency of her look, Marzio, even as he seeks to exculpate Beatrice, cannot but refer to 'the truth' of Beatrice's involvement with her father's death. Yet, for Beatrice, the question of her guilt becomes less a question of judgement than of the correct naming of the charge. Beatrice cannot murder her father because she rejects his status when she refuses to give him the 'dread name' of 'father' (*The Cenci*, 3. 1. 144) and she will not accept the charge of parricide for the same reason. Her expressive gaze returns once she has teased out the problem of naming in her mind.

However, such sophistry prevents her from being an unblemished character. Cenci's aim, to deform Beatrice's ethical framework so as to render her '[h]ardened', like her father (*The Cenci*, 1. 1. 94), in the face of Marzio's suffering, seems successful to a point:

Cenci. I will drag her, step by step,
Through infamies unheard of among men:
She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon
Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad,
One among which shall be…What? Canst thou guess?
She shall become (for what she most abhors
Shall have a fascination to entrap
Her loathing will) to her own conscious self
All she appears to others; and when dead,
As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,
A rebel to her father and her God,

(*The Cenci*, 4. 1. 80-90)

The parentheses house Cenci's most psychologically acute form of torture. Conjuring before her 'what she most abhors', Cenci delineates how she will be chained to that which she detests by her own 'loathing will'. Cenci 'will drag her, step by step,' through torments to destroy body and soul, imagining her ostracised from all society. 'She shall stand shelterless', uses its sibilant sounds to whisper ominously of the coming nightmare of Beatrice's life. The pinnacle of his cruelty is his attempt to force Beatrice to participate in her own horrifying transformation. Though Cenci will put her on this destructive path, it is Beatrice who is condemned to perpetuate and further her own ruination. Forced to see herself as the crowd will, Beatrice is to be alienated from all human and divine community.

By acts four and five, Beatrice has fallen a long way from the ethical power she was awarded at the start of *The Cenci*. Her first words in the play: 'Pervert not truth, / Orsino' (*The Cenci*, 1. 2. 1-2), starkly point up the scale of Beatrice's metamorphosis, where by the end, she is more guilty of logic-chopping than any other character. Yet Shelley does not encourage the audience to condemn her, as Stuart Sperry notes with reference to Shelley's preface to *The Cenci*: 'It is to invite, indeed require, us to condemn Beatrice's actions unblinkingly and simultaneously to love her, an act incorporating but transcending mere forgiveness'.[40] It is 'irresistibly pathetic' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) that Beatrice becomes entrapped, in the Cenci's terms, into losing sight of her former moral standards. Beatrice comes to behave with the 'restless and anatomizing casuistry' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 317) that Shelley warned his audience against in his preface as she twists herself into an untenable ethical position, just as Tasso flattered the tyrant that imprisoned him. Earl Wasserman's sense: '[d]espite her deeds, we are to see Beatrice not only as sincerely convinced of her innocence but as innocent in some fundamental sense, even though she herself is incapable of understanding the reason as she searches about for justification' seems apt,[41] and Marzio's final speech bolsters her difficult innocence:

MARZIO

Torture me as ye will;
A keener pang has wrung a higher truth

[40] Stuart Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 140.
[41] Wasserman, p. 124.

From my last breath. She is most innocent!

(*The Cenci*, 5. 2. 163-165)

Though Paul Endo claims '[h]er defense, appealing to a "holy and unstained" self-image, commits her to dissimulation',[42] rather, Beatrice views herself as having overcome the tyranny of his performance as father-God of her family. Her casuistry witnesses her father's tyranny more than it marks the destruction of Beatrice's innocence. There becomes no stable sense of her identity, as Michael O'Neill shows: 'it is more accurate to regard the play as deconstructing the idea of 'self-awareness'; by exposing the dependence of awareness on language, with all the pitfalls and treacheries, the play confronts the audience with the impossibility of arriving at a stable sense of self'.[43] 'Guilt' and 'innocence' become interrogated states as both point to a certainty that the play denies. Tyranny has undermined stable identity as a viable concept, and Beatrice is the primary victim of such a shifting sense of selfhood, closing the play as a theatrical performer rather than as a lyric speaker. As a consummate actress, to the point of critical suspicion,[44] Beatrice is forced to stage herself before spectators that waver between Camillo's and Giacomo's sympathy to the Judge's and the Pope's pitiless decrees. Her hope, reminiscent of Shelley's letter to Peacock, is that 'any persecuted being of the present day, for from the depth of dungeons public opinion might now at length be awakened to an echo that would startle the oppressor' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47), but instead, before her audience, it is the oppressor's judgement that condemns her to death.

Beatrice's complexity, where her 'imagination and sensibility' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 318) shine as brightly as her circumstances warp her nature, allows her to become a difficult double for Shelley as poet. Stephen Cheeke emphasises the importance of audience for creating the link between Shelley and his heroine: 'The popular audience is also a tribunal sitting in judgment and reaching a verdict, and in having to endure this other form of heart-stopping theater Shelley and Beatrice are again cross-fated'.[45]

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[42] Endo, p. 387.

[43] Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). p. 75.

[44] 'The trial scene allows her to finally appear as what and who she "is": a commanding actress', Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 192. See also: 'Shelley's heroine proves her own unfitness for the stage by acting'. Margot Harrison, 'No Way for a Victim to Act?: Beatrice Cenci and the Dilemma of Romantic Performance', *Studies in Romanticism* 39. 2 (2000), p. 188 (pp. 187-211).

[45] Cheeke, p. 145

Shelley viewed himself as subject to such vicious scrutiny as, despite his confidence in his play, *The Cenci* was met with disgust: 'Bessy tells me that people reprobate the subject of my tragedy—let them abase Sophocles, Massinger, Voltaire & Alfieri in the same sentence, & I am content.—I maintain that my scenes are as delicate & free from offence as theirs. Good Heavens what w$^{d.}$ they have tragedy!' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 200) The defiance, misery, and anger in this letter to Leigh Hunt show Shelley responding to the loss of his hopes for popularity. Before the publication, he wrote excitedly to Peacock that 'I am exceedingly interested in the question of whether this attempt of mine will succeed or no—', adding that he felt some certainty as to its appeal: 'I am strongly inclined to the affirmative at present, founding my hopes on this' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 102). Condemned not to death, but to dishonour and neglect, like Beatrice, Shelley is silenced. Shelley's artistry is confirmed by Beatrice's complexity, where Shelley resists her being perceived, *pace* Barbara Groseclose, as simply 'a victim, [or] a secular Martyr'.[46] She becomes another poet figure, aligned with Tasso, Shelley himself, and Hunt, as one who stands against tyranny despite its killing power. Though Lucy Newlyn sees 'his [Shelley's] purpose is to show that "revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes," and that "if Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better,"'[47] *The Cenci* is painfully conscious of the impossible, pain-fraught 'sad reality' (Preface to *The Cenci*, p. 314) of being a poet. To be fated for 'hopeless persecution' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47), just as Shelley felt fated for neglect, is the dark heart of Shelley's relentless tragedy.

Despite the obvious differences between *The Cenci*'s 'sad reality' and *Prometheus Unbound*'s 'beautiful idealisms' ('Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, p. 232), Shelley's fascination with language as a means of embodying power struggle is expressed to compelling effect in both works.[48] Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* attains its kaleidoscopic quality through the formal experiments attempted throughout the

[46] Barbara Groseclose, 'The Incest Motif in Shelley's *The Cenci*', *Comparative Drama* 19. 3 (1985), p. 236 (pp. 222-239).
[47] Lucy Newlyn, *"Paradise Lost" and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 114.
[48] 'It is undoubtedly the case that *The Cenci* incites contrasts with *Prometheus Unbound*. But the temptation to read the play in the light of the lyrical drama should be resisted when it leads the reader away from the impact and power of the individual work'. O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings*, p. 91.

'composite order' of his lyrical drama.[49] Yet such experimentation is not merely formal, but integral to the ethical dimension of *Prometheus Unbound,* where embodiment rather than description becomes the hallmark of Shelleyan drama. Shelley does not simply subvert or resist formal fixity; rather, in a display of lyric intensity, the poem ranges through a variety of forms, each form deliberately developing its own internal direction through its own discrete logic. The striking difference between the uses of language as the play progresses shows Shelley revealing how language might alter as the play traces the movement from tyranny to freedom, from blank verse to experimentation with the aesthetic possibilities of language. Imagination becomes vital to the political heart of the play, as P. M. S. Dawson notes,[50] and Prometheus combines poetic with political power in the lyrical drama.[51] The implicit possibilities of generic hybridisation create for *Prometheus Unbound* a subtle narrative where the reader moves from Prometheus's tormented linguistic hell to the beauties of unfettered poetic language. Exchanging the 'mingled voice / Of slavery and command' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 2. 30-31) for 'mild, free, gentle voices, / And sweetest music, such as spirits love' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 2. 33-34) becomes the mark of freedom in the play, a freedom embodied in language.

Prometheus Unbound, written at intervals between August and September 1818 and mid-1820, shows Shelley meditating on tyranny with the same intensity as in *The Cenci*. Prometheus' response to Jupiter's punishment drives Act one, which opens with Prometheus imprisoned on a rock, 'eyeless in hate' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 9). Shelley had observed Tasso's ignominious attempt to gain favour from his captor in his letter to Peacock:

> There is something irresistibly pathetic to me in the sight of Tasso's own hand writing moulding expressions of adulation & entreaty to a deaf & stupid tyrant in an age when the most heroic virtue would have exposed its possessor to

[49] As suggested by Stuart Curran's chapter, 'Composite Orders' in Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 181.
[50] '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." This imaginative re-creation of existence is both the subject and the intended effect of *Prometheus Unbound'*. P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 109.
[51] 'The romantic Prometheus is a fundamentally political icon'. Stuart Curran, 'The Political Prometheus', *Studies in Romanticism* 25.3 (1986), p. 431 (pp. 429-455).

> hopeless persecution, and—such is the alliance between virtue & genius—which unoffending genius could not escape.—'

(*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47)

Such response to tyranny seems 'irresistibly pathetic' to Shelley, yet the Promethean mode of defiance comes to seem no less tragic as he is degraded by his blind hatred for Jupiter.[52] Defiance, like Tasso's adulation, is a reaction to tyranny that, though understandable, prevents a revolutionary rejection of oppressive power structures. Marlon B. Ross's claim, '[p]oetry must strike at the roots of order to plant new order, which in turn must be supplanted ad infinitum. Only in this way will the impulse to accept another's order and the tendency to exploit that accepted order for tyrannical purposes be suppressed',[53] is enacted as Prometheus must seek another, a more powerful means, of challenging Jupiter's reign. *Prometheus Unbound* reveals that Shelley's eponymous hero needs not 'unsay[ing] his high language' (Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, p. 229) but to move beyond its limits.

Prometheus' curse of Act one, spoken by the Phantasm of Jupiter, reveals the linguistic cost of Prometheus' self-enchaining loathing. Hughes' sense that it stands as 'not much more than second-rate rant, far below the level of the wonderfully kinetic opening and those heuristic words a new Prometheus has been struggling to speak' is apt as Prometheus' bombast offers little in the way of poetic beauty.[54]

> Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind,
> All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;
> Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Human-kind,
> One only being shalt thou not subdue.
> Rain then thy plagues upon me here,
> Ghastly disease, and frenzying fear;
> And let alternate frost and fire
> Eat into me, and be thine ire
> Lightning, and cutting hail, and legioned forms
> Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms.

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[52] Susan Hawk Brisman, '"Unsaying his High Language": The Problem of Voice in "Prometheus Unbound" ', *Studies in Romanticism* 16.1 (1977), p. 52 (pp. 51-86).
[53] Marlon B. Ross, 'Shelley's Wayward Dream-Poem: The Apprehending Reader in "Prometheus Unbound"', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987), p. 114 (pp. 110-133).
[54] Hughes, p. 6

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 262-71)

The form is as 'fixed' as Prometheus' mind. Opening with cross-rhymed lines before moving into three pairs of couplets, moving from iambic pentameter to tetrameter before returning back to pentameter, this fixity resembles the emotional content of the lines. The lines seem more masochistic than revolutionary, and Curran's claim that '[t]he drama turns upon our realization that Prometheus' curse has maintained Jupiter's power, and in the face-off between Prometheus and Jupiter we are shown similitude, not difference' encapsulates the poetic problem of Prometheus' curse.[55] Prometheus' defiance is his only pose as he courts Jupiter's torments. Satanic pride renders Prometheus a negative of Jupiter, reactive to his actions, suffering his torture, rather than seeking to forge his own path.[56] Though Earth thrills at the sound of Prometheus' rebellion, Prometheus immediately rejects his words. The reader and Prometheus are left cold by his over-theatrical rant as Shelley's subtlety suggests that Prometheus must overcome his defiance. Ethics and aesthetics seem inextricably bound.

Throughout Act one, the lyrical is suppressed in favour of the dramatic element.[57] 'Even the blank verse' writes David Taylor, 'has a distinctly theatrical—as opposed to a "lyrical"—force',[58] The Fury's speech, despite its bitter rhetorical power, is dramatic rather than lyrical as the poetry takes on the certainty of cutting realism:

> *Fury.* In each human heart terror survives
> The ravin it has gorged: the loftiest fear
> All that they would disdain to think were true:
> Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
> The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.
> They dare not devise good for man's estate,
> And yet they know not that they do not dare.

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[55] Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975), pp. 83-84.

[56] 'The complexity of the relation between Jupiter and Prometheus may therefore be summarized in the following manner: so long as Prometheus defines himself in relation to his opposition to Jupiter he functions within the shadow world of the analytical reason, sacrificing his creative faculty to an analysis of its effects'. Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 116.

[57] As noted by James R. Bennett, '"Prometheus Unbound," Act I, "The Play's the Thing"', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 23 (1974), pp. 32-51.

[58] David Taylor, '"A Vacant Space, an Empty Stage": *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Last Man*, and the Problem of Dramatic (Re)form', *Keats-Shelley Review* 20 (2006), p. 19 (pp. 18-31).

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 618-24)

Stressing the universality of terror in 'each human heart', the Fury insists on the hopelessness of endeavour, sacrifice, and optimism. The physicality of the metaphor increases its horror; Shelley provides an image remarkable for its visual clarity as the Fury insinuates its words into knowable reality. The power of Jupiter's reign reveals itself to lie in the ability of these messengers to make fear an actual physical entity. Echoing Prometheus' opening speech, where he condemns the 'slaves' forced to honour Jupiter with 'knee-worship' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 6), the Fury's metaphor appropriates Prometheus' own verbal structures as it reinforces Prometheus' most hate-filled and pessimistic moment in the lyrical drama. Presenting this as fact, the Fury shows humanity to be haunted by their impotence and derided by their own consciousness of their lack of daring. In the Fury's speech, mankind is frozen in a static world where change is impossible.

> The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
> The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
> The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom;
> And all best things are thus confused to ill.
> Many are strong and rich, and would be just,
> But live among their suffering fellow-men
> As if none felt: they know not what they do.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 625-31)

This portrait of lack insists on the endlessly impossible nature of change. This creation of binaries sees the Fury access a potent brand of Manichaeism that separates the world into irreconcilable contraries reminiscent of Thomas Love Peacock's *Ahrimanes* that had permeated Shelley's earlier epic romance, *Laon and Cythna*. Each of the first three apparently descriptive lines is divided into two parts by the punctuation, which underlines the incompatible nature of the Fury's oppositions. By seeming to compliment the virtues of 'many' humans, who are strong and rich, and 'would be just', the Fury heaps up more bitterness by snatching away this potential for revolutionary action. The final shot by the Fury is to pervert the words of Christ on the cross, as reported by the Gospel of Luke, 'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). This appropriation of Christ's words by the Fury shows Shelley subtly showing the potential distortion of the nature of Christ's sacrifice by quietist forces that aim to subdue protest or change. Despite

the words seeming to forgive and absolve the 'strong and the rich' from guilt by ignorance, by placing them in the mouth of Jupiter's agent, Shelley reveals the pernicious manipulation of Christ's words by authority figures. Tyranny represents cynicism as truth, and Prometheus must free himself from their linguistic nets to voice a new truth for revolution to succeed. Implying the need for forgiveness, these words rebound with equal force against their speaker.

Despite the rhetorical strength of the Furies' arguments, and the terrifying visions imposed on Prometheus, Prometheus cuts through their attempts to make words into unchangeable physical reality. The war between good and evil represented in this way attests to Kenneth Neill Cameron's assertion that '[n]or does Shelley share Peacock's cynical attitude towards the prevalence of evil in the world'.[59] Prometheus' rejection of their persuasive formulae is condensed into two lines, yet within these lines, Shelley undoes their rhetorical certainty:

> *Prometheus.* Thy words are like a cloud of wingèd snakes;
> And yet I pity those they torture not.
> *Fury.* Thou pitiest them? I speak no more! [*Vanishes.*

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 1. 632-33)

Prometheus exposes the Fury's final speech to be no more than a 'mingled voice / Of slavery and command' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 2. 30-31), a voice which lacks the lyrical intensity that will enter the play later after Jupiter's overthrow. The metaphorical concretising speech of the Fury into is transformed into a simile by Prometheus' newly opened mind. The Fury's picture is revealed as merely linguistic sophistry, which, though painful, can be refigured by other words, other interpretations. The introduction of pity, which the Fury implied as he appropriated 'they know not what they do' from Christ, is shown to destroy the hateful hegemony of Jupiter's reign of fear. Without physically battling the Furies, Prometheus banishes what Blake described as 'mind-forged manacles' from his discourse.[60] The

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[59] Kenneth Neill Cameron, 'Shelley and *Ahrimanes*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 3.2 (1942), p. 295 (pp. 287-295).

[60] William Blake, 'London', 8, *Blake's Poetry and Designs: Illuminated Works, Other Writings, Criticism,* selected and edited Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, 2nd ed. (New York, NY; London: Norton, 2008), p. 53; 'As Prometheus encourages, by giving us speech so that we can create thoughts that then expand the interplays of words, we can, as Nietzsche does, reassert the continual and self-overcoming interaction between ever-changeable language and its self-transforming speakers'. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 109.

intellectual dexterity required of Prometheus as he extricates himself from Jupiter's psychological prison witnesses the vital significance of language to *Prometheus Unbound*. Language must be refigured from dramatic discourse into lyrical power to reveal the power of deposing 'the most remorseless capricious & inflexible of tyrants' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47).

Act two opens with Asia reading 'his [Prometheus's] written soul' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 2. 1. 110) in Panthea's eyes, prompting the pair to seek Demogorgon to furnish Asia with answers to her questions. As in Act one, Demogorgon and Asia speak in blank verse, in the 'sublime style' identified by Laura Wells Betz where the reader must untangle the 'stubborn syntax' and 'clotted sound effects' to tease out the meaning.[61] Once Asia realises the power within, after Demogorgon tells her that 'a voice / Is wanting' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 2. 4. 115-16), the register changes to the 'sweeter' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 2. 5. 38) words that reveal the quality of the mental revolution quietly performed in the play. Poetic beauty demonstrates how tyranny's overthrow transforms language in the imaginatively triumphant poetry of her final speech at the close of Act two:

> My soul is an enchanted boat,
> Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
> Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
> And thine doth like an angel sit
> Beside a helm conducting it,
> Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 2. 5: 72-77)

Slowing the opening two tetrameter lines with the extended vowel sounds, Shelley creates a hypnotically lulling line, where he suggests the congruity of the soul and the boat by their phonetic mirroring. The slow moving rhythm of the stanza mimics the slow transformations throughout the verse as this enchanted boat becomes like the sleeping swan. 'Like the sleeping swan, she is poised for an instant in the lyric' writes Harold Bloom,[62] and Shelley's poetry moves, like the waves upon which the swan floats, to bear the reader along with its rhythms. The soul moves upon 'the silver

[61] Laura Wells Betz '"At once mild and animating": *Prometheus Unbound* and Shelley's Spell of Style', *European Romantic Review* 21.2 (2010), p. 166 (pp. 161-181).
[62] Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* ([1959] Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 128

waves of thy sweet singing', and the repeated 's', 'th', and 'w' sounds form an alliteratively smooth passage. The rhythmic and phonetic form of the poetry does not simply mirror the content of the lines. Rather, the surpassing congruence of the two renders it almost impossible to divide the semantic meaning from the formal construction of the poem, as Shelley suggests in *A Defence of Poetry*.[63] Enchanted by the poetry,[64] the reader, like Asia, must be possessed by the lyric as Shelley's artistic instinct impels the poetry along.

> It seems to float ever, for ever,
> Upon that many-winding river,
> Between mountains, woods, abysses,
> A paradise of wildernesses!
> Till, like one in slumber bound,
> Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
> Into a sea profound, of ever-spreading sound:

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 2. 5. 78-84)

Asia's words continue in their trance-like tranquillity, as she floats upon the 'silver waves' of her metaphor. The almost echoing quality of 'float ever, for ever' demonstrates without insisting upon the waves on which she is borne, while the half-rhyme of 'ever' and 'river' brings out the 'seeming' nature of Asia's experience of eternity. Reaching the ecstatic affirmation of 'a paradise of wildernesses', Asia glories in the natural beauty of the 'mountains, woods, abysses' as the list luxuriates in the paradise it enacts as it describes as it builds towards the exclamation mark. The final three lines of the stanza, with the three end rhymes of 'bound', 'around', and 'sound' suggest the effect of the poetry's music on the imagination of the reader. The reader is bound around in sound, as the music of the poem embodies its description of the 'sea profound, of ever-spreading sound'. Shelley's artistry acts not to threaten, but to cradle the reader and Asia, as the rhythms of the verse perform their power over their speaker and the reader. Poetic beauty is no ornament. Rather, it resembles Shelley's argument in *A Defence of Poetry* where he claims that the ethical excellent of Ancient

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[63] 'Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves without reference to that peculiar order'. *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 678.

[64] Betz refers to this as Shelley's 'hypnotic style'. See Betz, p. 167.

Greece is mirrored by its artistic achievements.[65] '"*Prometheus Unbound*" is in the merest spirit of ideal Poetry' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 219), and ideal poetry bodies forth a rejection of tyranny based on its ethical as well as its aesthetic beauty.

Act three reveals the transition from tyrannical language to the poetic beauties of freedom. Jupiter's triumphal opening speech celebrates his power, reliving his rape of Thetis despite her pleading, as he conjures Demogorgon's appearance in confident blank verse. Though Jupiter demands to know Demogorgon's name, Demogorgon offers a name, 'Eternity' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 1. 52), that is only an approximation of his actual meaning. Jupiter's overthrow is almost immediate, with him falling after a speech that begins by attempting to seize power before realising that 'The elements obey me not' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 1. 80). Shelley emphasises the doubling between Jupiter and Prometheus that the latter has finally overcome, with Jupiter's agony directly recalling Prometheus' own in Act one. 'No pity, no release, no respite!' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 1. 64) echoes Prometheus' 'No change, no pause, no hope!' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 1. 24), and this congruity underscores the damning identification that Prometheus has escaped. The blank verse, with its dramatic and epic connotations, seems rigid in comparison to the previous scene's poetic profusion where sound had created harmonies that enchant and beguile. Yet, despite Yeats's criticism, Shelley does not simplify the revolution.[66] Though Jupiter's banishment is necessary, his plea that 'he would not doom me thus. / Gentle, and just, and dreadless, is he not / The monarch of the world?' (*Prometheus Unbound,* 3. 1. 67-69) offers a searing rebuttal to Prometheus' ideal nature that Shelley does not gloss. There is no response to Jupiter's charge. Rather, the problem of political change looms over the work, lending credence to Baker's sense that '[b]ehind the insistent hopefulness of Shelley's drama, the conditional *IF* bulks large as life'.[67] Still more hauntingly, Shelley refuses to make the dethroning simply positive. Tyranny, as Shelley's letter to Peacock makes clear, deforms and disfigures its victims as well as

[65] 'The drama at Athens, or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age'. *A Defence of Poetry,* p. 684.
[66] 'Shelley the political revolutionary expected miracle, the Kingdom of God in the twinkling of an eye, like some Christian of the first century'. W. B. Yeats, 'Prometheus Unbound', *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 418 (pp. 419-425).
[67] Carlos Baker, *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 107.

the aggressors, making Jupiter's fall and Prometheus' lack of mercy 'irresistibly pathetic' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) to the audience.

However, Shelley does not allow the reader to linger on the episode, focusing rather on the newly revivified world after Jupiter's banishment. Ocean's response offers a perspective of unmitigated joy, where 'Henceforth the fields of heaven-reflecting sea / Which are my realm, will heave, unstained with blood' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 2. 18-19). Jupiter's banishment immediately effects change as the possibilities of a world without brutal autocracy can be imagined:

> Tracking their path no more by blood and groans,
> And desolation, and the mingled voice
> Of slavery and command; but by the light
> Of wave-reflected flowers, and floating odours,
> And music soft, and mild, free, gentle voices,
> And sweetest music, such as spirits love.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 2. 29-34)

Tracing the change from what was to what will be, Ocean paints a prediction that soberly incorporates the cruelties of the past while celebrating the new world. The characterisation of the voice becomes vitally significant to the portrait, where the past allowed one 'mingled voice' built out of a binary between 'slavery and command' while the future opens out a multiplicity of 'free, gentle voices'. Where the one voice had controlled all things, forcing diverse shapes to become mirror images based on power relationships, freedom converts fixed binaries into possibilities. Ellen Brown Herson's claim that '[p]oetry restructures the cosmos, rather than merely representing a passage through it'[68] is insightful, but ideal poetry seems contingent on freedom as opposed to creating it. Poetry becomes a way to explore and express freedom, opening out new prospects rather than restructuring the world in set configurations. Harold Bloom's argument, that '[t]he point of scene IV, Act II is that it refuses to put it to us as Scripture — it precisely does not want to be "a holy book." The *Defence* knows all about the hardening of poetry into religion, and "Prometheus" knows what

[68] Ellen Brown Herson, 'Oxymoron and Dante's Gates of Hell in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound"', *Studies in Romanticism* 29.3 (1990), p. 374 (pp. 371-393).

the *Defence* knows',[69] is insightful. Freedom multiplies rather than defines potential, as language becomes the means to reveal the nature of freedom itself. Delighting in the freedom only beginning to be grasped, Prometheus' speech, in a manner anticipating *Epipsychidion*'s speaker's fantasy of leaving with Emily to an island (*Epipsychidion*, 430-529), plans the Titans' removal to a Cave:

> We will entangle buds and flowers, and beams
> Which twinkle on the fountain's brim, and make
> Strange combinations out of common things,
> Like human babes in their brief innocence;
> And we will search, with looks and words of love,
> For hidden thoughts, each lovelier than the last,
> Our unexhausted spirits; and like lutes
> Touched by the skill of the enamoured wind,
> Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new,
> From difference sweet where discord cannot be;

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 3. 30-39)

Unlike the rapt description of *Epipsychidion*, which culminates in the breakdown of the poem, Prometheus' prophecy calmly details the promised future where the erotic charge of Shelley's later poem is transmuted into loving musicality. The entangling of buds and flowers, where they will make '[s]trange combinations out of common things' looks ahead to *The Witch of Atlas* and the Witch's weaving together of disparate elements in Shelleyan metapoetic mode.[70] Their synthesising, harmonising ideal is quickly shadowed by the only 'brief innocence' of human children, but Shelley refuses to allow this moment of pain to disrupt Prometheus' speech. Emphasising the importance of love, in lines 34 and 35, Prometheus makes communication contingent on 'the low voice of love, almost unheard' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 3. 45) that beautifully harmonise without any discord to disrupt or sour their talk. Like lutes, Prometheus, Asia, Panthea, and Ione are inspired by the wind, just as the speaker of 'Ode to the West Wind' sought to be. The group are ideal poets, sequestered away from the world to smile upon the future achievements of man and

[69] Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, Yale Studies in English: Volume 141 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 123-24.

[70] 'The Witch, whether or not she is supposed to be identified with that of "the still cave of the witch Poesy" ("Mont Blanc," line 44) seems to represent poetry, or at least its effects'. Hugh Roberts, 'Chaos and Evolution: A Quantum Leap in Shelley's Process', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 45 (1996), p. 177 (pp. 156-94).

'the progeny immortal / Of Painting, Sculpture, and rapt Poesy' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 3. 54-55). Humanity is already elevated, where:

> None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk
> Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes,
> Yet question that unmeant hypocrisy
> With such a self-mistrust as has no name.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 4. 149-52)

Speaking with truth, purpose, and above all, love, Act three looks forward to the eternity ushered in by Prometheus' revolution, where poetry enacts the passage from tyranny to freedom.

Though Tilottama Rajan, amongst others, describes Act 4 as somehow apart from the rest of the lyrical drama, her sense that 'the triumphant fourth act seems an aria tacked on to a three act drama, rather than a resolution which grows organically from it' ignores how Shelley makes the final act the culmination of his 'theme of love and forgiveness… [which] elucidates how the causality of tyranny can be broken, while, at the same time, his literary form attempts to shatter the conceptions that poetry and drama are limited to the past, and prove that they are, in actuality, eternal and timeless'.[71] Yet Shelley goes further than promoting the eternal value of poetry. He embodies freedom in language, careening through form after form, rhyme after rhyme, to illuminate how linguistic freedom might express itself. Richard Cronin notes that '[w]hen in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley describes language as an Orphic song his tone is celebratory, but he is describing a redeemed world which, we must imagine, is given meaning by a redeemed language.'[72] Shelley's Act four offers a symphonic quality where the climax of freedom is to move from mode to mode, from one form of beauty to another as Ione and Panthea's blank verse is complemented by the verbal gymnastics of shifting poetic form. The celebration reveals what it is to succeed in a search for 'the manifestation of something beyond the present & tangible object' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 47) as the poetry strives to display the range and complexity of beauty unfettered from tyranny:

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[71] Tilottama Rajan, 'Deconstruction or Reconstruction: Reading Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound"', *Studies in Romanticism* 23.3 (1984), p. 318 (pp. 317-338); Jeffrey A. Schwarz, 'Shelley's Eternal Time: Harmonizing Form and Content in *Prometheus Unbound*'. *Keats-Shelley Review* 13 (1999), p. 76 (pp. 76-87).

[72] Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 4.

But now, oh weave the mystic measure
  Of music, and dance, and shapes of light,
Let the Hours, and the spirits of might and pleasure,
Like the clouds and sunbeams, unite.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 77-80)

The rhymes, mixing feminine and masculine rhymes with the intense and confident injunction to 'weave' 'music, and dance, and shapes of light' into unity, recalls Prometheus' synthesising speech of Act three scene three where beauty comes from plurality of voices and elements chiming together. The gathering certainty of the chorus seems transmitted to the Chorus of Spirits, whose song delights in the promise unfolding before them:

And our singing shall build
  In the void's loose field
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
  We will take our plan
  From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called the Promethean.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 153-58)

The flexibility of rhyme comes to the fore as Shelley weaves together sounds that do not quite chime together, suggesting the disciplined and controlling will behind the rapt harmonies. Rather than the final rhyme, 'Promethean' sound a comic note when harnessed to 'plan' and 'man', Shelley makes it seem the culmination of both poetic effort and imaginative felicity. Shelley avoids, as William Michael Rossetti states in a thorough analysis of Shelley's use of rhyme, the fate of the poet who 'would be compelled to sacrifice some delicacy of thought, or some grace or propriety of diction'[73] Rhyme provides a means for Shelley to display will and inspiration at once, where heaven appears almost ready to be ascended. The Chorus of Hours and Spirits enjoins its listeners to 'scatter the song' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 175) as Shelley's imaginative effort to '[d]rive my dead thoughts over the universe' ('Ode to the West Wind', 63) seeks to connect with his audience.

[73] William Michael Rossetti, ed., *Adonais by Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), p. 60.

Yet such embodiment never tips into narrow self-delight at the expense of clear-eyed reality. Demogorgon's final speech that closes the play shows Shelley return to carefully regular stanza form as Demogorgon counsels prudent vigilance that might provide the 'seals of that most form assurance / Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 563-64). Though the first stanza proclaims the triumph of love, Demogorgon lingers on the dreadful challenge of such a victory, forcing the reader to linger on the 'narrow verge of crag-like agony' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 560) and fully recognise the tremendous odds beaten at tremendous cost. Demogorgon provides the 'spells' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 568) that will prevent tyranny reassuming control, but the stanza form deliberately fails to enchant the reader. Rather than gliding, the reader pauses over the 'Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 562) that can prevent a slide into destruction with sober pause. The final couplet rhyme between 're-assume' and 'Doom' of stanza two, almost breaks into pessimism as the congruence of the two sounds makes failure seem nearer certainty than success, and the third and final stanza spells out the burden of freedom to the reader:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
> Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
> This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
> Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
> This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 570-78)

Adding an extra line to stretch the couplet into a triplet, this stanza enlarges itself to suggest the incredible endurance required of humanity to prevent 'Doom' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 4. 569). The first three lines eschew enjambment as their contained force elucidates the scale of the challenge to come. Though Shelley refuses to concretise the woes, wrongs, and omnipotence of the future travails, the pain-fraught events to come even defy Hope's optimism as the darkness and power seem impossibly difficult to resist. When following lines give way to enjambment, it embodies the load to be borne, where change, the essence of human life, according to

'Mutability', is prohibited if freedom is to be retained. The final three lines burst through into a positive and inspiring vision, but it is a vision that does not dispel the doubts and challenges he had previously conjured. Michael O'Neill's sense that '*Prometheus Unbound* is memorable precisely because the fear that its words may "pass away" has, throughout, prompted the inventiveness of its language' suggests the power of this speech,[74] as Demogorgon couples doubt and affirmation in his final words. Resisting any easy banishment of the tensions that drive the poetry along, Shelley's lyrical drama experiments with tyranny and freedom only to make hope an always mitigated poetic virtue.

Though *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* stand as deliberately different types of production, both seem propelled into being by Shelley's preoccupation with how the poet might respond to tyranny and how freedom might be embodied in poetic language. The letter to Thomas Love Peacock offers a perspective on both the play and the lyrical drama that reveals the difficult though vital connection between Shelley's epistolary prose and his literary work. *Prometheus Unbound* in such light is no 'rarified abstraction',[75] nor does *The Cenci* seem only an observation of the 'sad reality' (Dedication to *The Cenci*, p. 314) of life crushed by tyrannical power. Timothy Webb rightly stresses that '[i]t is his political views in the widest sense which inform such beautiful idealisms as *Prometheus Unbound* and which provide their directing energy, but those political views cannot be separated from his views of nature, religion, philosophy, love, art and literature',[76] and similarly, Shelley's poetic principles should not be separated from his political views. Fascination with the relationship between tyranny and poetic power becomes the vital connection that unites Shelley's lyrical dramas.

[74] O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings*, p. 125.
[75] Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 111.
[76] Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, p. 21.

8. 'The right road to Paradise': *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*

Adonais and *The Triumph of Life* represent the pinnacle of Shelley's poetic achievements. *Adonais*, challenging the genre it channels, pushes the elegy as far as it can, exhausting possibility after possibility in its sinuous Spenserian stanzas. *The Triumph of Life*, with its nightmarish music vying to both represent and control vision, embodies its fleet of foot mental processes in swift *terza rima* stanzas. Both poems are united by their intense exploration of the purpose, possibilities, and limits of poetry, from elegiac commemoration to visionary rhyme. Though many of Shelley's poetic works are informed by close attention to these questions, the significance of them becomes heightened in *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley and Keats's 1820 letters influence *Adonais* profoundly,[77] prompting Shelley to fashion *Adonais* as a response to their mutual advice. *The Triumph of Life* shapes itself from a meditation on the poetry and art of Shelley's fellow artists, as revealed by his letter to John Gisborne of 1822. Though Shelley's poems are not the sites of a 'socialised scene of writing',[78] Shelley fashions a creative dialogue between himself and fellow artists suggestive of the 'jury' composed of his 'peers' that he posits in his *Defence of Poetry* (*A Defence*, p. 680). Shelley's letters lay bare the preoccupations that would colour his poetry.

Though critics have repeatedly traced the presence of Keats's poetry in Shelley's *Adonais*, there has been scant attention paid to the significance of their extraordinary epistolary exchange of 1820.[79] These letters show Keats and Shelley seeming to offer barbed advice to one another on how to improve their respective poetry. The interplay between the poetry and the letters reveals apparent 'advice' to be a working out of a personal poetics for each poet. Each offered the other his own formula for poetic achievement, formulas that had grown significantly out of the poetry they had recently written or were in the process of writing. However, following Keats's death, Shelley's tribute to him would be to produce an elegy that responds to Keats's and his

[77] '*Adonais*, thus, needs to read in the context of the *Defence* and of Shelley's response to Keats during 1820 and 1821'. Jeffrey N. Cox, 'Keats, Shelley, and the Wealth of the Imagination', *Studies in Romanticism* 34.3 (1995), p. 391 (pp. 365-400).
[78] Cox, p. 366.
[79] See, for example, Andrew Epstein, '"Flowers that Mock the Corse Beneath": Shelley's *Adonais*, Keats, and Poetic Influence', *Keats-Shelley* 48 (1999), pp. 90-128.

own advice, crafting a poem alert to the counsel offered to and by his fellow poet. Opening the correspondence on 27 July 1820, Shelley's solicitous letter to Keats focuses on his fears about Keats's health, and the obvious concern of the letter is barely concealed by Shelley's joking asides, as he admits '(for I am joking in what I am very anxious about)' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 220). Inviting Keats to Italy to improve his health and extolling the pleasures of Italian art and landscape, Shelley takes on the role of the senior poet addressing a junior colleague. Praising *Endymion* even as he criticises its execution, Shelley counsels against the way in which Keats offers 'treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221), noting that the public cannot and will not endure such breaches of poetic decorum. The final paragraph announces Shelley's instruction to Ollier to send Keats his work, with *Prometheus Unbound* being the next lyrical drama that Keats should receive (Keats had already read *The Cenci*). Praising his own work in understated terms, Shelley notes its adoption of 'a different style' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221) and offers some advice to Keats: 'In poetry *I* have sought to avoid system & mannerism; I wish those who excel me in genius, would pursue the same plan.— ' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221) The dash offers the *sotto voce* sense that Keats particularly needs to follow where Shelley leads. Though respectful and earnest in its praise of Keats, the tone of instruction clearly denotes Shelley as the more seasoned and self-conscious poet, a tone to which Keats responds in kind.

Keats's reply to Shelley, despite its warmth as he addresses 'My dear Shelley' just as Shelley had addressed 'My dear Keats', engages in a similar manner of offering pointed advice. Keats's letter brims with energy, seeming, in Grant Scott's phrase on Keats's letters a whole, a 'masterpiece[s] of motion'.[80] Thanking Shelley for his thoughtful letter, Keats's urbane and black-humoured prognosis signals his stoic outlook: 'My nerves at present are the worst part of me, yet they feel soothed when I think that come what extreme may, I shall not be destined to remain in one spot long enough to take a hatred of any four particular bed-posts' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222). Passing quickly to poetry, Keats is self-deprecating about *Endymion*, 'my poor Poem' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) as if to divorce himself from his earlier work. Yet, his response to *The Cenci* is deliberately muted. Keats claims to be only capable of

[80] Grant F. Scott, 'Introduction', *Selected Letters of John Keats*, revised edition edited by Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. xxi.

judging its dramatic or poetic qualities, but goes on to do neither, instead offering an oblique critique of Shelley as a poet with no mention of the play proper. Advising Shelley to learn greater, '"self concentration" selfishness perhaps' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), Keats goes on to suggest that Shelley 'might curb [his] magnanimity and be more of an artist, and load every rift of [his] subject with ore' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222). The advice Keats offers Shelley seems as inward as Shelley's for Keats, which Keats seems to recognise with his amused aside '[a]nd is not this extraordinary talk for the writer of Endymion?' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) Keats claims that '[a] modern work it is said must have a purpose, which may be the God—*an artist* must serve Mammon—' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), drawing Shelley's attention to the gap between Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and his own 'modern' composition, *Prometheus Unbound*, which resides in the difference between their audiences. Though Shelley might refuse system, he must have 'a purpose', an end and a readership for which he writes. The 'it is said' claims a lofty though curiously unspecific form of authority for Shelley's need to break from his immersion in Classical principles in favour of looking to the marketplace. Enjoining Shelley to embrace discipline which should 'fall like cold chains upon you' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), Keats offers a prescription that fits its intended subject and himself. Hard-edged in its criticism unmitigated by praise, Keats takes the opportunity to correct Shelley as the older poet had corrected him without the softening references to any 'genius' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221) that Shelley had made in his previous letter. Demanding and thoughtful, Keats's criticism forswears politesse in favour of clear-eyed criticism. Shelley, though choosing not to respond in a letter, took to poetry to fashion *Adonais* on the foundations of Keatsian counsel. Consequently, on Keats's death, these remarkable suggestions contain the crux of Shelley's poetic direction in *Adonais*. Loading every rift with ore and steely discipline became the markers of Shelley's ambition. Keats's words, 'I remember you advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead heath—I am returning advice upon your hands' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) offer a challenge to Shelley that *Adonais*, as an elegy to his poetic peer, has to meet. Praising his own elegy for its artfulness (see Shelley's praise of *Adonais* as a '*piece of art'* (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 294)) does not become a means of admitting that *Adonais* is a narcissistic composition intended for Shelley's greater glory. *Pace* Peter Sacks, *Adonais* is no narcissistic

effusion.[81] Rather, it reveals the deep engagement with Keats's advice that sets his elegy in motion. Shelley's tribute to Keats, then, is to follow his advice, and be the monk to his own imaginative monastery.

Attention to discipline, artistic selfishness, and poetic purpose form the core of Shelley's poetics in his elegy for Keats. Andrew Franta stresses the significance of genre to *Adonais*: 'In describing *Adonais* as a "*piece of art,*" he emphasizes the poem's embeddedness in the elegiac tradition it invokes and thus conceives of the poem as an object that, in its artful invocation and embodiment of that tradition, defies the kind of criticism that killed Adonais'.[82] Shelley seeks to connect himself and Keats through this version of the pastoral as his strict adherence to genre acts as a monument to Keats and allows Shelley the opportunity to test Keats's advice from his letter in his poetry.[83] *Adonais* opens with the ceremony appropriate to the genre, a ceremony immediately disturbed by the barely concealed emotional turbulence that destabilises the stately slowness of the lines. *Lycidas* lurks in the background as Shelley, like Milton, gestures to his subject's youth and his own unreadiness to perform the awful duty of elegy:

> Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
> Compels me to disturb your season due:
> For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
> Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.
> Who would not sing for Lycidas?[84]

(*Lycidas*, 6-10)

The solemn ritual pattern of the stanza forms an opening that is tense with proliferating underlying meanings. Milton draws attention to the ceremony of plucking the berries, but his act of grieving seems troubling and troubled. Milton has plucked the unripe berries with 'forc'd fingers rude', suggesting Edward King's youth

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[81] Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), p. 159.
[82] Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 128.
[83] 'As with Byron and Shelley in "Julian and Maddalo," so with Keats and Shelley in *Adonais*, the singing contest is ultimately one act of humane fellowship in sympathy with and linking life and art, an act that claims victory over every aspect of the antipastoral as it is embodied in death'. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 123.
[84] John Milton, *Lycidas*, *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 41.

and the injustice of his early death. Behind this reproach of the circumstances of King's death lies the poet's fear of his corresponding unripeness. Shelley embeds the same tension into his elegy, where the grieving poet is forced to perform in a role for which he is unready. Stuart Sperry sees such attention to the elegist's own circumstances as revealing Shelley's self-centred adaptation of the elegy: 'Like *Adonais*, the elegy to Keats which he composed later in the same year, the poetical effusion he addressed to Teresa early in 1821 has much more to say about Shelley himself than about the subject or circumstances that provide the occasion for the poem'.[85] But Shelley goes far beyond merely representing the self. Shelley introduces the additional problem of being unconvinced of the elegy's generic efficacy. Like Lycidas, Adonais also 'knew / Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme' (*Lycidas*, 10-11). Shelley must perform as Milton had performed, taking on the role of Milton's inheritor so coveted yet feared by Keats himself,[86] and provide an adequate consolation. 'Sad occasion dear' forces *Adonais* to become the poem of 'purpose' that Keats had enjoined Shelley to write.

Having invoked the '[m]ost musical of mourners' (*Adonais*, 4. 28), bidding her and his readers to weep along with the speaker (who will hereafter be referred to as Shelley), the pain of death's inevitable dominion repeatedly forces the erratic speaker back to despair. Carefully tracing the generic footpath of elegy, Shelley does not skip a step in his pursuit of poetic consolation. Jerrold E. Hogle's question, '[w]hy does the poet go to such lengths to be fervently generic, especially since his more usual procedure is to shift the elements of one genre toward those attached to others?'[87] cuts to the quick of Shelley's performance in his elegy, and it is a performance that is guided by Keats's counsel. 'System & mannerism' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221), eschewed in favour of poetic exploration of the limits and potential of the elegy, shows Shelley rigidly adhering to the genre, moving through trope after trope in a form of poetic 'discipline' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) that Keats had challenged Shelley

[85] Stuart Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 158.
[86] In a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats admitted that *Hyperion* contained 'too many Miltonic inversions', John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 167. Shelley's knowledge of *Hyperion* would have added to his sense of Keats's debt to Milton.
[87] Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 295.

to learn. With his wings well and truly 'furl'd' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), Shelley introduces a parade of fellow sufferers to his poem. Refusing to feign an achieved consolation that the poem has not earned, Shelley's stream of mourners offers no succour; each disappears within a stanza of its introduction, leaving Shelley to grieve alone, unsupported by any fellow suffering creature. Isolation prompts Shelley's realisation that nature can provide no solace to the alienated mourner:

> Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,
> But grief returns with the revolving year;
> The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;
> The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear;
> Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Seasons' bier;
> The amorous birds now pair in every brake,
> And build their mossy homes in field and brere;
> And the green lizard, and the golden snake,
> Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.

(*Adonais*, 18. 154-62)

The heart-smitten first line veers on the edge of performativity before the second line sees Shelley reveal the prompt for his dramatic outburst. The disjunction between nature and the self jolts the speaker into a pained realisation of nature's regeneration despite human misery. After the shock of the first two lines, the following seven lines enter, almost in spite of themselves, into the blossoming life unfolding in the natural world. Tracing the changed music of the winds and the stream and watching the newly awakened 'green lizard, and the golden snake', the poetry lifts into serenity. The simile of the 'unimprisoned flames' captures the image of the lizard and snake to the point of celebrating natural beauty. Yet such absorption cannot be sustained. Refusing the pastoral 'system', as he claims his poetry does in his letter to Keats (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 221), Shelley momentarily gives in to beauty only to move beyond it back to the haunting problem of grief. Despite stanza 19 delighting in how '[a]ll baser things pant with life's sacred thirst' (*Adonais*, 19. 169), the line carefully omits humanity from such life-affirming joy of being. Stanza 20 opens with the 'leprous corpse' (*Adonais*, 20. 172), but after the initial shock of such abjection, Shelley renders its decay beautiful in the lines. The philosophical meditation hurls Shelley back to grief:

> Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows

Be as a sword consumed before the sheath
By sightless lightning?—th' intense atom glows
A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose.

(*Adonais*, 20. 177-80)

Shelley recalls Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and its image of his 'voiceless thought' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 97. 913) like a sheathed sword. Yet where Byron moves from the potency of desire to the crushed feelings of the alexandrine, Shelley phrases his allusion to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a question rather than as a Byronic statement of loss. Such fragile questioning cannot be sustained as the 'intense atom' burns brightly for a moment before dying away. Girding himself to load every rift with ore, Shelley continues with Keatsian 'purpose' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222): to create an elegy that tests its own limits even as it overflows with possibility.

Refusing to rest on the static sense of the 'most cold repose', Shelley shifts away from the corpse to the survivors as the next stanza bursts into sustained questioning of grief itself:

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,
But for our grief, as if it had not been,
And grief itself be mortal! Woe is me!
Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene
The actors or spectators? Great and mean
Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.
As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.

(*Adonais*, 21. 181-189)

'Alas!' and 'Woe is me!' once again lend a performative edge to the stanza, yet rather than creating a suspicion of inauthenticity, the intensity of the questioning resembles the 'intense atom' glowing for a moment as loss licenses dramatic language. The enjambment of the fourth and fifth quoted lines enacts a dizzying vertigo where the impassioned and unanswerable questions disrupt the sonority of the Spenserian stanza. Shelley accepts the inevitability of death without resolving the problem of grief; if 'grief itself be mortal', then nihilism looms dangerously in view. 'Woe is me'

describes the grieving self rather than behaving as a mere expostulation and the questioning reveals a tensed alertness to the problem of death as forcing a reflection on the meaning of life. '[O]f what scene / The actors or spectators' seems to look forward to *The Triumph of Life* (see ll. 305-06) in its bewildered questioning of the same state. Shelley makes such probing the only viable response to Adonais' death despite the despairing and unanswerable rhetorical character of Shelley's questions. Despite the yearning for an answering voice, Shelley is forced to confront these questions with no guide and continue his elegy despite their imposing philosophical bulk. To meet 'massed in death' flattens the dead into an indistinguishable and amorphous group without any semblance of identity. For Shelley, self and 'purpose' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) seem lost in the face of death. In an attempt to salve such solemnity, the final three lines make grief the inevitable cost of living, suggesting a systematising that seems at odds with the rest of the stanza. The questions remain unanswered as life remains, as Byron claims, a 'Sphinx' (*Don Juan*, 13. 12. 96),[88] but Shelley has life return to death, and each year to sorrow in a deliberate, and failing, attempt to impose meaning onto loss. Forcing the elegy to earn its consolatory stripes, the conclusion to the stanza imposes a starkly life-negating system onto the poetry.

Yet the poem refuses to be content with such a settled sense of dark certainty. Keats wrote to Shelley that '[a] modern work it is said must have a purpose', and Shelley returns to his elegiac purpose by turning to Urania, who sought to save Adonais from death when 'So struck, so roused, so rapt' (*Adonais*, 23. 204). The muse's 'living Might' (*Adonais*, 25. 218) nearly shames death to annihilation, but her defeat is protracted and terrible: 'I would give / All that I am to be as thou now art! / But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart!' (*Adonais*, 26. 232-34). With Urania vanquished, Shelley is left to fashion for Keats a eulogy that seems to damn its subject despite its praise:

> 'O gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,
> Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men
> Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart
> Dare the unpastured dragon in his den?
> Defenceless as thou wert, oh where was then

[88] Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed., introd. and notes by Jerome McGann, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 768.

Wisdom the mirrored shield, or scorn the spear?
Or hadst thou waited the full cycle, when
Thy spirit should have filled its crescent sphere,
The monsters of life's waste had fled from thee like deer.

(*Adonais*, 27. 235-43)

Critics have repeatedly railed against Shelley's portrait of the artist, with James Heffernan going so far as to claim that Shelley's poem is an 'insult' to Keats's memory.[89] Yet this denies the artistry that Keats had claimed Shelley should learn. Rather than offering a mimetic vision of Keats, Shelley moulds Keats into Adonais, transformed and transfigured from life into art by means of elegy. No mere narcissistic attack on his subject,[90] the poet and the poem carefully incorporate the essence of Keats's advice of 1820 into the elegy. Keats had enjoined Shelley to avail himself of the 'selfishness' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), proper to the poet, a selfishness that allows the poet power over his invention despite the 'cold world' (*Julian and Maddalo*, 617) that would ask for fact instead of fiction. The 'child' conjured for the reader is reminiscent of Spenser's *Faery Queene*, with Shelley casting Adonais as a 'Childe' hopeful of glory despite his inevitable defeat. Shelley alludes to himself in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock as 'a knight of the shield of shadow and the lance of gossamere' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 261), reinforcing the sense of Shelley, like Keats, as an enfeebled though impassioned hero-poet. To connect Adonais, and thereby Keats, with Spenser's romance is a gesture that cements an artistic rather than personal relationship between the elegist and his elegised subject. Both poets had been enchanted by Spenser's poetry, and Shelley and Keats had written poems that, though uncelebrated, set out their respective stalls as influenced by the major Renaissance poet of the imagination.[91] Any weakness is integral to the artistic portrait, not to the memory of Keats himself. Despite Paul de Man's sense that 'life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal

[89] James A. W. Heffernan, '*Adonais*: Shelley's Consumption of Keats', *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 177 (pp. 173-91).
[90] For an example of such a reading of *Adonais*, see Caroline Bertonèche, 'From Poet to Poet or Shelley's Inconsistencies in Keats's Panegyric: *Adonais* as an Autobiographical Work of Art', *Romanticism on the Net* 5.1 (2007), document 4, mis en ligne le 15 juin 2007, consulté le 19 juin 2015. URL : http://erea.revues.org/180 ; DOI : 10.4000/erea.180
[91] Greg Kucich refers to them as 'two of his greatest admirers and subtlest readers during the period'. Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park; PN: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life',[92] Shelley demonstrates the separation between life and art, and chooses to commemorate Keats as an artist rather than as a man. Intriguingly, Shelley alludes to the epistolary conversation between himself and Keats, returning to their mutual sense of the prematurity of their artistic efforts. Yet, even as the personal appears to enter the poetry, so too does the conversion of the critic into the 'unpastured dragon' and use of the tropes of epic heroism, where Perseus' defeat of Medusa enters the poem, showing Shelley's determination to transfigure biography into artistry. Remonstrating with Keats for colluding in his own defeat does not show Shelley distorting the circumstances of Keats's death. Rather, it reveals the care with which Shelley embeds the conventions of elegy into the poetry, so seamlessly as to suggest Shelley's personal investment into the interpretation. Such deliberateness of artistic purpose bears witness to Shelley's insistence that his elegy stands as 'a highly wrought *piece of art'* (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 294).

Urania's continued denunciation notes the vulture-like behaviour of Keats's detractors, implicitly contrasting Byron's magisterial response to his critics with Adonais's defeat: 'The Pythian of the age one arrow sped / And smiled! — The spoilers tempt no second blow, / They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low' (*Adonais*, 28. 250-52). Yet Urania does not offer full approval to Byron's power; Shelley seems to present him less as 'a leader found' than as a poet whose methods are open to serious scrutiny.[93] The critical adoration of Byron seems bred of a cringing cowardice rather than an admiration of his poetic powers, and the next stanza soars as it celebrates Adonais's godlike mind:

> 'The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;
> He sets, and each ephemeral insect then
> Is gathered into death without a dawn,
> And the immortal stars awake again;
> So is it in the world of living men:
> A godlike mind soars forth, in its delight
> Making earth bare and veiling heaven, and when

[92] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 69.
[93] Vincent Newey, *Centring the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 169.

It sinks, the swarms that dimmed or shared its light
Leave to its kindred lamps the spirit's awful night.'

(*Adonais*, 29. 253-61)

The ephemerality of the critics sets them apart from Adonais's eternal presence in the pantheon of great poets, as Carlos Baker argues: 'They are the only parts of the past that will never pass away'.[94] The 'death without a dawn' smacks of prophecy as Shelley withholds any afterlife from the parasitical horde. The explicitness of the analogy transforms any sense of Adonais's defeat into his success as he joins his fellow poets in the 'abode where the Eternal are' (*Adonais*, 55. 495). Worldly success becomes dim in comparison to the 'kindred lamps' of posterity, and artistic achievement is constituted as a blaze of genius that is recognised by a 'the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet… composed of his peers' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 680) rather than measured by the critical periodicals of the day. Turning then to a portrait of the 'most celebrated writers of the present day' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 701), Shelley prepares the way for poetry to take centre stage.

Introducing Byron, Moore, and Hunt into the poetry, Shelley appraises their shades, capturing each in his stanzas to stand as fellow mourners of Adonais's death. Despite Byron's antipathy to Keats's poetics, culminating in Byron's sceptical though placatory response to Shelley's posthumous praise of Keats's work,[95] Shelley deliberately does not attend to Byron's rejection of Keats's poetics. As Adonais is Keats refined into art rather than remembered as a man, 'The Pilgrim of Eternity' (*Adonais*, 30. 264) is and is not Byron. Byron's shade, as conjured by Shelley, represents his art, not himself, and his shade's mourning of Adonais, is neither distortion nor falsification of Byron's stance on Keats's poetry. Likewise, Hunt is cast as a quasi-feminised nurturer of Adonais's talent rather than celebrated as an influence on Keats. Implicitly responding to Keats's injunction to 'load every rift of your subject with ore' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), Shelley remakes the biographical details, remoulding them so as to promote poetry as the core of his elegy.

[94] Carlos Baker, *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 120.
[95] See *Letters: PBS* II. p. 284, n. 6.

When Shelley turns to what appears to be self-portraiture, the reader is attuned to the difficult separation of the personal and the poet, but conscious of the way in which Shelley forces their uneasy alliance on occasion in the poem. Stephen Behrendt's persuasive reading stresses the portrait as metapoetic and in keeping with generic conventions where poetry itself is the subject of the lines: 'That Shelley is personifying Poetry in the "one frail Form," and not merely engaging in public self-indulgence, is further indicated by his use in stanza 32 of neuter rather than masculine pronouns, which have the effect of deflecting our attention from the masculine figure that follows this stanza and focusing it instead on the essence rather than the form of that figure'.[96] Yet Shelley embeds the self carefully in the lines, momentarily harmonising the dissonance of self and poetry. Though the portrait, like *Adonais* as a whole, is 'energized and subtilized by [its] consciousness of [itself] as [a] poem[s]',[97] the self remains present in the lines, as the portrait is a coherent whole, where the 'it' and the 'he' of the description cannot be separated.

> Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,
> A phantom among men; companionless
> As the last cloud of an expiring storm
> Whose thunder is its knell; he, as I guess,
> Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,
> Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray
> With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,
> And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,
> Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey.

(*Adonais*, 31. 271-279)

Distanced from himself, the 'as I guess' flags up the gulf between the Shelley as fashioned in *Adonais* and the Shelley writing the poem. The 'one frail Form' is a compound of Shelley as both a person identifiably unique and as the archetypal poet; Shelley performs the difficult gesture of having both components mingle in the portrait. *A Defence of Poetry*, also written in 1821, posits the poet as 'a nightingale who sits in the darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds' (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 680), and the 'companionless' quality of the 'frail Form' is

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[96] Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 254.

[97] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. xv.

highly suggestive of such a separation between the poet and the mass of humanity. Though the guilt of the portrait is not present in *A Defence*, the identification of the poet/Shelley with Actaeon recalls how *A Defence* refers to poetry as requiring 'the alloy of costume, habit &c.' (*A Defence*, p. 681), suggesting that the poet's sin is the attempt to apprehend poetry without its necessary veils.[98] Though Jeffrey Cox describes the portrait as presenting a figure that is a 'composite Wordsworthian-Keatsian-Shelleyan poet of the self',[99] there is little sense that it is confined only to these parameters. Fleeing from the vengeance of his own tormented thoughts, the 'frail Form' is self-tortured, endorsing Michael O'Neill's sense of 'Shelley's poetry of self-awareness as ordeal'.[100] Gesturing to the 'frail Form' as both self-portrait and vision of the poet, Shelley's figure goes well beyond the charges of either narcissistic self-pity or meta-poetic abstraction.[101] His imagination, with its wings 'furl'd' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 224), walks the difficult line between two discrete interpretations of the 'frail Form'.

Jostling interpretations allow Shelley to heighten the tension of the poem, where the anxieties embedded in the elegy generate the heat and light that fires *Adonais* into its swift-winged conclusion. Though Teddi Chichester Bonca claims that 'Narcissus and Christ collide most disastrously and ensure that the conspicuous suffering… reigns supreme',[102] Shelley's use of symbols, including Cain, are used with artistic '"selfishness"' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 224) that allows him to yoke together clashing figures in his Spenserian stanzas. Moving away from portraiture to a philosophically charged exploration of death, critics such as G. Kim Blank have considered Shelley to prioritise his musings above memorialisation: 'the metaphorical attempts to come to *terms* with Death greatly outnumber the specific praises of Adonais, a.k.a. John Keats'.[103] Yet this suggestively recalls the nature of the task urged on Shelley by

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[98] Likewise, *The Witch of Atlas* has the Witch weave 'a subtle veil' (*The Witch of Atlas*, 13. 151) so as not to overpower mortals who gaze upon her. It is generally agreed that the Witch represents poetry itself. See William Keach, 'Reflexive Imagery in Shelley', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 24 (1975), p. 58 (pp. 49-69).
[99] Cox, p. 394.
[100] O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 127.
[101] Richard Cronin points up Shelleyan self-pity as an integral part of the portrait. See Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 192.
[102] Teddi Chichester Bonca, *Shelley's Mirrors of Love: Narcissism, Sacrifice, and Sorority* SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 42.
[103] G. Kim Blank, 'Introduction', *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views*, ed. G. Kim Blank (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 10 (pp. 1-12).

Keats. Shelley writes with the 'purpose, which may be the God' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) of *Adonais*. Scrutinising the elegy and death itself in his aesthetically dazzling stanzas, Shelley reinscribes the meaning of life and death, of Keats and Adonais, as the poem accelerates after stanza 37's excoriating curse of the critic, the 'viperous murderer' (*Adonais*, 36. 317) who had thus condemned Adonais to death. Transforming life into death, Shelley's passionate reversal hinges on the conceit bearing up for the entire stanza:

> Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—
> He hath awakened from the dream of life—
> 'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
> With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
> And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
> Invulnerable nothings.—*We* decay
> Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
> Convulse us and consume us day by day,
> And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

(*Adonais*, 39. 343-51)

Quieting a silent audience, Shelley goes beyond *Lycidas*' claim that 'Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,' where Milton admits 'Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor' (*Lycidas*, 166-67). Shelley shifts the parameters of life and death, claiming that Keats rises beyond the constraints of cold mortality. The dashes cut across the page, gesturing to the 'intense inane' (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3. 4. 204) to which the poet aspires. Turning to our mortal lot, Shelley's estranging vision reveals life as a form of nightmare punctuated by our panicked violence. The emphasis on '*We*' insists on its truth, as Shelley makes such degeneration the product of our troubled lives, where cruelly, it is the 'cold hopes' that consume the grief-stricken and terrified individual. More than a 'metaphysical defence of suicide',[104] Shelley works to persuade the reader of the 'contagion of the world's slow stain' (*Adonais*, 40. 356), darkly reconfiguring death as life. Yet Shelley's careful rhyme undermines this smoothing interpretation of the stanza. 'Grief' fails to rhyme with 'life' and 'knife', insinuating the anti-life drive implicit in grief. Drawing our attention to such incongruence suggests that the stanza itself is the product of a 'mad trance' that flattens life into

[104] Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 172.

pain and imagines death as an awakening. Shelley forces these words into a semblance of rhyme through his Spenserian stanza, and, 'curb[ing] [his] magnanimity' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222), Shelley moves from persuasive accents to 'hypnotic' song.[105]

The final stanzas of *Adonais* glitter with a fatalism flowing from the all too persuasive death-drive of Shelley's earlier stanzas. Though P. M. S. Dawson rightly senses that '[t]he Power in *Adonais* is in effect a deification of the imagination, as Adonais' presence is felt,'[106] Shelley keeps in play the opposing sense, also present in *Mont Blanc*'s evocation of 'power' (*Mont Blanc*, 127), that such Power may not be wholly, nor even mostly, positive. The imagination, the font of the hope and despair that had propelled the elegy, comes to transform Shelley from individual elegist to 'a medium, as much as an origin, through whom earlier poetic voices pour, even as they are reshaped, and through whom collective energies are channeled'.[107] Conscripted into an eternal pantheon by the power of his own invocation, Shelley seems compelled to reject all that is human as '[l]ife, like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity,' (*Adonais*, 52. 462-63). But such a rejection is far from simple. The conjured dome offers a beauty that seems stamped out by the white radiance, void of colour, that awaits the hypnotised and hypnotising poet. Despite Tilottama Rajan's claim for 'the ineffectual angelism of *Adonais*',[108] Shelley has been all too effective at driving himself '[f]ar from the shore, far from the trembling throng' (*Adonais*, 55. 489). The elegy, in Shelley's hands, has become the ultimate tribute to Keats the artist where both poets meet in the '"self concentration" selfishness' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 222) of poetry.

The Triumph of Life stems from different, less dialogic, inspiration than *Adonais*. Shelley's final poem grows out of the echo chamber of his response to the literature in which he was steeped as he composed *The Triumph of Life*. Yet rather than the poem

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[105] Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle; Washington: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 224.
[106] P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 256.
[107] Michael O'Neill, "*Adonais* and Poetic Power" *The Wordsworth Circle*, 35.2 (2004), p. 54 (pp. 50-57).
[108] Tilottama Rajan, 'Romanticism and the Unfinished Project of Deconstruction', *European Romantic Review* 23.3 (2012), p. 295 (pp. 293-303).

being of interest for its status as a work in relation to others, the letter reveals the complexity of Shelley's artistic reaction to his peers that he embeds into the poem. *The Triumph of Life* figures itself alongside, in contrast to, and against the array of figures he conjures in his restless though poised letter to John Gisborne, which moves between ideas at lightning pace. Written on April 10, 1822, a month before Shelley began composing *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley opens the letter with thanks to Gisborne for preparing *Hellas* for publication if he was involved and asking him for an appraisal of Shelley's Hellenic poem. Yet no hope seems attached to Shelley's efforts, as his bleakly urbane comments suggest: 'Am I to thank you for the revision of the press? or who acted as midwife to the last of my orphans, introducing it to oblivion, & me to my accustomed failure? May the cause it celebrates be more fortunate than either!—' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). Shelley's pained reference to his continued obscurity and lack of popular success seem resigned to the agony of neglect. Referring to his works as 'orphans' recalls *Epipsychidion*'s Advertisement giving the poem a 'sweet self' ('Advertisement' to *Epipsychidion*, p. 513). Shelley's poetry seems cast adrift without any protector as Shelley himself labours under the continued failure that seems his lot. His *Hellas* seems destined to perish and return Shelley to the despair of failure on the literary stage, but the sense of a larger issue rescues his complaint from a narrow focus on the self. Despite his poem's certain doom, Shelley reveals 'anything but terminal despondence' in both his decision to write *The Triumph of Life*,[109] as Behrendt argues, but also in his assured sense of the worth of *Adonais* as he writes, 'I know what to think of Adonais, but what to think of those who confound it with the many bad poems of the day, I know not.—' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). No longer beholden to critics for a sense of his poetic worth, Shelley relies on his own analytical incisiveness and literary imagination for a marker of his achievements.[110] Posterity becomes the only audience for whom to write.

Such self-assurance in poetic taste and creative worth leads Shelley to test his critical mettle on Goethe's *Faust*. Shelley's praise focuses specifically on the particular inspiration it provokes in him: 'It deepens the gloom & augments the rapidity of

[109] Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 233-34.
[110] I depart here from Donald H. Reiman who claims that '[i]f any personal experience deeply colored the poem, it was Shelley's feeling that his literary efforts had failed'. Donald H. Reiman, 'Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": The Biographical Problem', *PMLA* 78.5 (1963), p. 550 (pp. 536-550).

ideas, & would therefore seem to be an unfit study for any person who is a prey to the reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination not to be restrained' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). The first clause would be an apt epitaph for *The Triumph of Life*, which has been variously praise by critics precisely for Shelley's intense *terza rima* that dazzles with its swift-winged lines,[111] and the 'gloom' speaks directly to the apparently pessimistic version of 'Life' found in the poem.[112] The second clause suggests that Shelley himself is not the ideal reader of *Faust*, as some of Shelley's biographers and critics have emphasised in studies that have revealed Shelley's sensitivity that could occasionally tip into delusion and ill-health.[113] Yet the vulnerable self-knowledge suggested by this shows Shelley transform weakness into critical strength. Such sensitivity allows Shelley to perceive the 'gloom' and 'reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination' that fire *The Triumph of Life* into its haunting vision. Conscious of his rehabilitation of his personal predilections, Shelley claims *Faust* as a poem of the 'elect' in a different manner to *Prometheus Unbound*: '—And yet the pleasure of sympathizing with emotions known only to few, although they derive their sole charm from despair & a scorn of the narrow good we can attain in our present state, seems more than to cure the pain which belongs to them.— ' The readers suited to *Faust* find some joy in meeting ghostly peers in the lines. If 'their sole charm [comes] from despair & a scorn of the narrow good we can attain in our present state' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406), this charm salves, in part, the loneliness of earthly disillusionment. Passing then to a strenuous upbraiding of Wordsworth, Shelley seems to pit Wordsworth and Goethe against one another:

> 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—

[111] 'Lines of living melody are not just lines of written verse but lines as they run, like veins, through the living readers of that verse'. Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 165.
[112] Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 188. See also Stuart Curran 'Of Education', *Evaluating Shelley*, ed. Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 40 (pp. 28-41). For a more literal sense of the darkness of the poem, see Stuart Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 187.
[113] See, for example, Judith S. Chernaik, 'The Figure of the Poet in Shelley', *ELH* 35.4 (1968), p. 566 (pp. 566-590).

> This earth,
> Which is the world of all of us, & where
> *We find our happiness or not at all.*[114]
>
> As if after sixty years of suffering here, we were to be roasted alive for sixty million more in Hell, or charitably annihilated by a coup de grace of the bungler, who brought us into existence at first.

(*Letters: PBS* II. pp. 406-07)

'The right road to Paradise' seems earned through a belief in something greater, beyond present existence, as Faust's dissatisfaction with the world is a marker of an elite who refuse the tyranny of things as they are, denying the 'narrow good' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406), to aim at something greater. Emphasis on the next world rather than the one in which we live might sit oddly with a poet as politically engaged as Shelley, yet here, there is no incongruence. To reject the current shape of '[t]his earth' is political as well as spiritual in Shelley's understanding. Faustian aspiration, which Madame de Staël had denigrated as revealing him as possessing 'more ambition than strength', where Faust comes to represent 'all the weaknesses of humanity',[115] is praised by Shelley as being an attempt to move beyond the material world. Wordsworth falls prey to Shelley's need to construct an antithesis to Goethe's otherworldly longings, and the quoted lines from *The Prelude* allow the younger poet to see his elder as a defender of what is rather than what ought to be. Shelley's darkly comic refusal of eternal punishment by the divine 'bungler' gestures towards the problem in *The Triumph of Life* as to by whose authority such suffering should be ascribed and how to break the cycle of misery. Shelley's vision in *The Triumph of Life* is neither of Wordsworth's '[t]his earth' nor of a Christianised 'Hell'. Shelley's

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[114] *The Prelude*, xi. 136-144:

> 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* for 26 Oct. 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* II. p. 406, n.2. Footnote reproduced in its entirety).

[115] Madame de Staël, 'Faustus', Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. by Walter Arndt and ed. by Cyrus Hamlin, A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Norton, 2001), p. 559 (pp. 558-559).

gaze is trained upon on '…we, who lost in stormy visions, keep / With phantoms an unprofitable strife' (*Adonais*, 39. 345-46), where the question, '"Then, what is Life?"' (*The Triumph of Life*, 544) echoes through the poem.

Though Shelley was deeply stimulated by *Faust*, some of his highest praise was reserved for the artist who had illustrated the edition:

> The artist makes one envy his happiness that he can sketch such things with calmness, which I dared only to look upon once, & which made my brain swim round only to touch the leaf on the opposite side of which I knew that it was figured.—

(*Letters: PBS* II. p. 407).

Inspired by the gulf between the creative artist and his production, Shelley yearns to emulate the boldness and calm he possesses where the sublimity of art leaves the artist unaffected. Even questioning if 'the artist has surpassed Faust' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 407), Shelley's response to the visual image becomes integral to *The Triumph of Life*, where he sketches descriptions that blur rather than clarify the scene. The deepening and speeding sense of sublime arrests the visual even as the vision unfolds where the poet must dare to 'sketch such things with calmness' despite his terror.

The letter speeds from idea to idea, moving between perspectives and impressions in a dizzying intellectual narrative that foreshadows the way in which *The Triumph of Life* moves between various positions without committing to a final stance. Shelley's poem sparks to life from this deepening and speeding sense of sublime. 'Reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) provide the focus of the poem's opening where the poet-speaker (who will be referred to as Shelley) is thrust into the landscape of *The Triumph of Life*. The Sun springs to life and after the initial burst of descriptive energy of the beauty of Earth and Ocean's orison, the sun, which had been compared to 'a spirit hastening to his task / Of glory and of good' (*The Triumph of Life*, 1-2), becomes a cruel father imposing his chosen toil onto his children. This jarring shift in focus and emphasis redirects the poem to Shelley as the perceiver and narrator of the vision:

> But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold

Had kept as wakeful as the stars that gem
The cone of night, now they were laid asleep,
Stretched my faint limbs beneath the hoary stem

Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep
Of a green Apennine: before me fled
The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep

Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head
When a strange trance over my fancy grew
Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread
(*The Triumph of Life*, 21-30)

Already refusing to relate his thoughts to the reader, *The Triumph of Life* opens with the secrecy that closes *Julian and Maddalo*, where Shelley withholds information, concealing the tale yet parading his secretiveness before the curious reader. The quoted lines' state of dream-like heightened awareness also recalls *The Mask of Anarchy* and the 'visions of Poesy' (*The Mask of Anarchy*, 4) that had unfolded before the sleeping poet. Yet, like in *Alastor*, Shelley entangles the status of the vision, deliberately failing to clarify the nature of the 'strange trance' while categorically claiming that it 'was not slumber'. This liminal state is mirrored by nature, where before him the night flees and behind him, day begins. Suspended between two states, the poet is thrown into an attempt to rationalise that which he sees, where the shade is 'so transparent that the scene came through' though it seems a hyper-reality as opposed to '[t]his earth' that he rejected so strongly in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). Shelley's vision

Was so transparent that the scene came through
As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
O'er evening hills they glimmer; and I knew

That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,
Bathed in the same cold dew my brow and hair
And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn

Under the self same bough, and heard as there

The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold
Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.
And then a Vision on my brain was rolled….

(*The Triumph of Life*, 31-40)

Despite the 'freshness of that dawn', the sweat-like dew covering the poet seems sickening. The 'veil of light' of the trance suggests that it illuminates the poet, but with the Sun featuring as a tyrannical rather than benevolent figure, the light comes to seem ambiguous, preparing the reader for the 'Shape all light' episode later in *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley's knowledge only extends to this being a return to a location rather than offering him a sense of the experience he will face. The beauty of the landscape, with the '[s]weet talk in music through the enamoured air' is effaced almost immediately by 'a Vision' that imposes itself on the poet's brain. As for Rousseau, the 'Vision' takes control of the brain, but where the vision 'rolled' across Shelley's brain, Rousseau's 'brain became as sand / 'Where the first wave had more than half erased / The track of deer in desert Labrador' (*The Triumph of Life*, 405-07). 'Vision' becomes a dangerous, though potentially enlightening in Shelley's case, imposition on the artist. The 'delusions of an imagination' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) seem to be forced upon the passive poet.[116]

Despite these delusions and the sense of passivity, Shelley's chosen form cannot but signal a firm control over his material. Drawing on Dantean *terza rima* and the Italian poet's divine vision, Shelley also registers his confident mastery of this slippery and difficult rhyme scheme, as William Keach shows: 'Much of the rhyming in *The Triumph of life* displays Shelley's ability to find the fortunate within the fortuitous, to build inventively upon what he finds, and thus to bind line to line and tercet to tercet through his own arbitrations of the arbitrary'.[117] Vision may be imposed on the poet, but Shelley's magisterial treatment of the *terza rima* seems celebratory of the possibilities of language and the poet's potential to yoke rhyme with rhyme and image with image. The 'right road to Paradise' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) is paved by alertness to the problem and limitations of language even as the poet glories in poetic

[116] Stuart Curran emphasises the importance of passivity in Shelley's work. See Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975), p. 37.
[117] William Keach, 'Shelley, Rhyme, and the Arbitrariness of Language', *Romanticism Past and Present* 6.2 (1982), p. 31 (pp. 23-42).

language's subtleties and bridging capacity. *Terza rima* seems particularly well-adapted to the speed of Shelley's vision, where he gazes on the 'one mighty torrent' (*The Triumph of Life*, 53) made up of people 'All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came, or why / He made one of the multitude' (*The Triumph of Life*, 47-49). Stripped of individuality, the multitude lacks the self-consciousness proper to Shelley, observer of this tableau. On the appearance of the 'Shape' driving the chariot, Shelley 'arose aghast / Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance' (*Triumph of Life*, 108-09), instinctively horrified by the spectacle. Yet the problem of vision immediately encroaches, where Shelley intimates a self-consciousness that such vision may be the product of 'reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination not to be restrained' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). More disturbingly, the people choose the tyranny of the veiled Shape, binding themselves in 'a yoke which they soon stooped to bear' (*Triumph of Life*, 116). William Dean Brewer rightly emphasises the problem of the 'sacred few' in *The Triumph of Life*, claiming them to be 'presented more as an impossible ideal than an attainable reality, and it serves to emphasise rather than put limits on Life's terrible power'.[118] However, their importance is the suggestion that such freedom is not impossible but rare, and their flight from earth attests to the unbearable problem of existence. Lingering only momentarily on their 'living flame' (*The Triumph of Life*, 130), Shelley spends far longer on 'the mighty captives' (*The Triumph of Life*, 135) of the earth. For a poet so ardent for liberty for the masses, it is a bitter reflection that the very freedom Shelley had promoted in his poetry and prose is joyfully rescinded by the people, lending support to Ross Greig Woodman's claim that: 'In *The Triumph of Life* he recognizes that his radical hopes for a renovated society are a delusion'.[119] Yet such heavy knowledge never completely permeates *The Triumph of Life* as the motion and power of the poetry and the ceaseless shift between images prevents any ossification into certainty.[120] The description of the multitude is marked by sympathy, and even desire, rather than contempt for their plight:

They, tortured by the agonizing pleasure,

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[118] William Dean Brewer, *The Shelley-Byron Conversation*, (Florida, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 121.
[119] Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 188.
[120] 'What Shelley says in *The Triumph of Life* does not, for all its power, necessarily have the support of a cut-and-dried moral perspective'. Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 184.

Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun
Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure

Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,
Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair,
And in their dance round her who dims the Sun

Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in the air
As their feet twinkle; they recede, and now
Bending within each other's atmosphere

Kindle invisibly; and as they glow
Like moths by light attracted and repelled,
Oft to a new bright destruction come and go,

(*The Triumph of Life,* 143-154)

These maenads dancing around the chariot are feverish and convulsed in their sexual and painful pleasures. Their maddened attempt to experience exhilarating corporeal fulfilment offers a beautiful though tragic perspective to the quasi-voyeuristic poet. Refusing moral censure, Shelley's sympathy is suggested by the lingering description that neither damns nor praises their attempt to discover bodily satisfaction. Lines 152-54 recall *Epipsychidion*, where Shelley refers to 'my moth-like Muse' (*Epipsychidion*, 53) and paints the destructiveness of the attraction and repulsion in his relationship with 'Emily' (*Epipsychidion*, 368-72). Sympathy underpins the portrait of the '[m]aidens and youths'; Shelley does not reject the multitude in contempt, but understands only too well the 'sad pageantry' (*The Triumph of Life*, 176) paraded before him. If Shelley gains 'the pleasure of sympathizing with emotions known only to few' (*Letters: PBS* II. 406), he does not refrain from sympathizing from those suffered by the many. Torn between and tormented by '[r]eproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406), the poetry sets up the piteous pageant of life without didactic prompting or clear guidance to the reader.

P. M. S. Dawson's claim that 'the dreamer doesn't want to forget the world's troubles, he wants to solve them. This may be a vain hope, but it is preferable to the

Lethean oblivion offered by Rousseau' is useful, [121] but the poem never commits to any sense that a solution can be provided, nor that the vision itself can be made sense of by the poet. The horror-stricken poet reveals, as Christoph Bode writes, 'the narrative impossibility, for any first-person narrator, of making coherent, "objective" sense of what he sees'.[122] This problem, where Shelley questions 'And what is this? / Whose shape is that within the car? and why / I would have added— 'is all here amiss?' (*The Triumph of Life*, 177-79) sees the entrance of Rousseau into the poem. Preventing Shelley from engaging in any proper reflection, Rousseau seems to arrive as if on cue, suggesting that he will perform as the Virgil to Shelley's Dante. Despite 'the weight / Of his own words' (*The Triumph of Life*, 196-97), Rousseau begins to relate his tale to Shelley, and counsels the young poet against joining the dance that had mutilated him. While apparently as horrified by the earth as the 'sacred few', Rousseau's delusion lies in his continuing obsession with his influence over the multitude:

> And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
> Earth had with purer nutriment supplied,
>
> 'Corruption would not now thus much inherit
> Of what was once Rousseau—nor this disguise
> Stained that within which still disdained to wear it.—
>
> 'If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
> A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.'

(*The Triumph of Life*, 201-07)

Despite blaming the world for his corruption, Rousseau's proud avowal of his power reveals his investment in earthly praise. Rather than rejecting the distorted values of the world as it is, he is profoundly immersed in things as they are rather than attempting to change or transcend the earth. Blaming earth for failing to supply him with 'purer nutriment', his sense of the poisonous influence of the worldly does not override his personal failure to seek something else. In this way, Rousseau recalls

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[121] P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 277.
[122] Christoph Bode, 'Discursive Constructions of the Self', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 51 (2008): http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019264ar

Shelley's quotation from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* that insists on '[t]his earth' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) while denying the possibility and significance of an elsewhere. Wordsworth's 'demoniacal' claim (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) aligns precisely with Rousseau's contempt for yet enslavement by this earth. Shelley's refusal to take part in the dance bespeaks a thoroughgoing rejection of what is, recalling his sense in the letter to John Gisborne that '[p]erhaps 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' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). The 'right road to Paradise' lies in a rejection of the debased values that warp the world into 'sad pageantry' (*The Triumph of Life*, 176).

The letter to John Gisborne reveals how Shelley refuses to conflate poet with poet, artist with artist, in *The Triumph of Life*. Though Timothy Clark argues that: 'Rousseau becomes the most explicit instance of the problematic superiority of the creative-destructive Shelleyan poet',[123] Rousseau is not merely a 'creative-destructive Shelleyan poet', nor is he the symbol of 'the tragic power of imagination becomes distorted into the tragic pageant of history',[124] as Shelley deliberately separates the this-worldly and other-worldly poets along the lines set out in the letter. However, strikingly, Shelley does not condemn Rousseau, nor does he offer didactic correction to him. Repeatedly, Shelley does not take up opportunities to censure or correct Rousseau, and his questioning draws Rousseau into suggestive replies that beget other questions, questions that propel the poem along rather than satisfying curiosity.[125] Comparing himself to Homer and the Ancients, Rousseau acknowledges the diseased power of his art:

> See the great bards of old who inly quelled
>
> 'The passions which they sung, as by their strain
> May well be known: their living melody

[123] Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 237.
[124] Clark, p. 242.
[125] 'The structure of the text is not one of question and answer, but of a question whose meaning, as question, is effaced from the moment it is asked. The answer to the question is another question, asking what and why one asked, and thus receding even further from the original query'. Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured', *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Harold Bloom et al (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979) p. 44 (pp. 39-73).

Tempers its own contagion to the vein

‘Of those who are infected with it—I
Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!

‘And so my words were seeds of misery —
Even as the deeds of others.’—

(*The Triumph of Life*, 274-81)

Unlike the poets of Ancient Greece, whose contained passion could excite rather than incite the soul, Rousseau’s words mortally wound their readers. Rhyming ‘strain’ and ‘vein’ to demonstrate the power of language working on the human form, Shelley reinforces the potential of poetry even as he grieves for the danger of words. Placing words and deeds at the same level, Rousseau comes close to Shelley’s own position in ‘Ode to the West Wind’, where Shelley implores the wind to ‘Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! / Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 66-69). But where Shelley’s longings are an attempt to rouse the people, in a quasi-Satanic mode of injunction that his listener must ‘Awake, arise, or be for ever fall’n’. (*Paradise Lost*, I. 330), Rousseau places personal creation above its affect: ‘“I / Am one of those who have created, even / “If it be but a world of agony.”—’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 293-95). Finding grandeur in the ‘reproaches of memory’ (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406), Rousseau’s self-mythologizing cuts close to the dangerous potency of language that may destroy rather than free its audience.

Increasingly agitated, Shelley begins to demand that Rousseau relate how his suffering befell him:

Speak.’—’Whence I came, partly I seem to know,

‘And how and by what paths I have been brought
To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;
Why this should be my mind can compass not;

‘Whither the conqueror hurries me still less.
But follow thou, and from spectator turn

Actor or victim in this wretchedness,

'And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn
From thee.—Now listen...

(*The Triumph of Life*, 300-08)

Hugh Roberts sees Rousseau's invitation as an opportunity: 'If we return to *The Triumph of Life* and, turning actor not spectator, avoid Rousseau's mistake of demanding a value that is not at risk in the flux of process, then we find the apparent nightmare of life's dance is a product of incorrect seeing, or choosing an inappropriate scale'.[126] Yet Rousseau figures himself as in need of instruction, just like Shelley himself. With no Virgil in sight, Shelley is called upon to teach Rousseau despite Shelley's own ignorance. Shelley's injunction, 'Speak' is followed by Rousseau demanding that, to paraphrase *Julian and Maddalo*, Shelley should learn in suffering and then teach Rousseau in song. Lacking understanding of his own plight, Rousseau cannot furnish Shelley with the answers he desires, so his demand that Shelley become 'actor or spectator' seems self-serving rather than didactic. Claiming that Shelley may 'guess' how Rousseau arrived at such a 'dread pass' suggests that Shelley, and by extension, the reader, has enough information to discover answers, but such judgement seems impossibly complicated.[127] Enjoining Shelley to experience that which he would understand opens up the problem of experience itself, and how far Shelley's choice to withstand the procession either shields him from error, as David Quint argues, or if Shelley, as Richard Cronin claims, 'has doomed himself to see life as a pointless progress from nowhere to nowhere ruled over by a blindfolded god'.[128] However, despite Rousseau's instruction, there is no opportunity for Shelley to join the dance. Immediately, Rousseau tells Shelley to 'listen' to his story, preventing Shelley from becoming either an actor or a spectator, resembling the

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[126] Hugh Roberts, 'Spectators Turned Actors: *The Triumph of Life*', *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, selected and ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 766.

[127] As Jacques Derrida argues: 'Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits, everything that was to be set up on opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth)'. Jacques Derrida, "Living On" trans. James Hulbert, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 84 (pp. 75-176).

[128] David Quint, 'Representation and Ideology in *The Triumph of Life*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 18.4 (1978), p. 641 (pp. 639-657); Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 217.

'movement of effacing and of forgetting' that Paul de Man sees as working to 'dispel[s] any illusion of dialectical progress or regress'.[129] Such a structure recalls how Shelley praised how *Faust* 'augments the rapidity of ideas' even as it displays the 'reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination not to be restrained' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). The vision, in its speed and deep 'gloom' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406), renders Rousseau's question both vital to the intellectual fabric of the poem yet almost irrelevant, as Shelley is offered no opportunity to illuminate and slow the pace of *The Triumph of Life*.

Relating his encounter with the Shape all light, where on her command, he drinks from a cup that renders his brain 'as sand' (*The Triumph of Life*, 405), Rousseau dwells on the aftermath of his loss:

'So knew I in that light's severe excess
The presence of that shape which on the stream
Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,

'More dimly than a day-appearing dream,
The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep;
A light from Heaven whose half-extinguished beam

'Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.—
So did that shape its obscure tenour keep

'Beside my path, as silent as a ghost;
(*The Triumph of Life*, 424-33)

Though Rousseau senses that all his memories have been effaced, here, he seems tormented by 'reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination not to be restrained' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406). Knowledge and experience haunt him as the 'shape' moves beside him even as he moves through the wilderness. Though ghostly and dim, this is described as knowledge rather than as speculation. Memory torments, where this 'light from Heaven' in its only 'half-extinguished beam' merely reminds

[129] Paul de Man, 'Shelley Disfigured', *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 44 (pp. 39-73).

Rousseau of loss. Reminiscent of Wordsworth's 'visionary gleam' ('Immortality Ode', 56), this beam, 'forever sought, forever lost', is still crueller than Wordsworth's light in its *presque vu* quality. The dream-like mode of experience forces Rousseau into deeper gloom, where loss, despite himself, propels him forward. Swept along with the multitude, Rousseau loses that which Shelley so prizes in his letter to John Gisborne, 'the pleasure of sympathizing with emotions known only to few'. Joining the multitude is a loss of self that leaves Rousseau bereft. Though Michael Scrivener claims that '[h]e [Rousseau] failed in his own quest, but by educating the speaker he has redeemed his error so that he seems finally liberated from the chariot of Life',[130] such sense of Rousseau as redeemed fails to summarise his passage through *The Triumph of Life*. Dante's example stands against Rousseau, with the Italian poet achieving what Rousseau cannot. Delayed by nothing, from the 'sweetest flowers' to 'the shadow nor the solitude' (*Triumph of Life,* 461 and 462), Rousseau chooses to become one of the many as 'but among' (*Triumph of Life,* 465):

'The thickest billows of that living storm
I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime
Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.—

'Before the chariot had begun to climb
The opposing steep of that mysterious dell,
Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme

'Of him who from the lowest depths of Hell,
Through every paradise and through all glory
Love led serene, and who returned to tell

'The words of hate and awe the wondrous story
How all things are transfigured, except Love;
For deaf as is a sea, which wrath makes hoary,

'The world can hear not the sweet notes…

(*The Triumph of Life,* 466-78)

[130] Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 314.

Attempting to transform himself into a hero, Rousseau's description of his action shows him plunging into Life's procession despite the deforming 'cold light' that alters him and all who experience it. Telling Shelley that he is 'a wonder worthy of the rhyme', Rousseau seems to but half understand Dante's poetry. Seeking not to be a poet but to be the subject of poetry, Rousseau finally condemns himself to being 'an actor' that cannot create but is recreated in language. If the world cannot hear Love's 'sweet notes',[131] this is a tacit avowal that Rousseau, too, is deaf to that which had been the saviour of Dante's song. The 'delusions of the imagination' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406) lead Rousseau away from being a poet and into the mass of humanity. Condemned to mass among '[t]hese shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown' (*The Triumph of Life*, 528), Rousseau's story leads Shelley to demand, with stark desperation, '"[t]hen, what is Life?"' (*The Triumph of Life*, 544). Rejecting '[t]his earth, / Which is the world of all of us, & where / *We find our happiness or not at all*' (*Letters: PBS* II. 406), Shelley suffers to hear Rousseau's embrace of what he would throw over as but 'narrow good' (*Letters: PBS* II. 406). Stuart Curran's claim, '[t]hat Shelley was capable of squarely confronting the destructiveness of experience in his last poem, *The Triumph of Life*, does not testify to suicidal inclinations or mutually cancelling impulses, but rather to a fundamental honesty large enough to take human realities, not dogmas, as the ground of art',[132] seems borne out by Shelley's sympathy with and awareness of the problem of life even as he searches for a solution for how to approach it. Pitting *Faust* against *The Prelude* is no mere effort to belittle his 'lost leader'.[133] Goethe, Wordsworth, and Rousseau offer ways of approaching the problem of life as his letter to John Gisborne sets up concepts that *The Triumph of Life* will magisterially address.

No 'approach to silence' as James Rieger has it,[134] *The Triumph of Life* plunges into the 'cold light' (*The Triumph of Life*, 468) with serious ambition and poetic consequence. Though unfinished, its accomplishment makes it seem less a fragment

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[131] 'In *The Triumph*, as in *Alastor*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and indeed all of Shelley's mature poetry, love is the great and ultimate Power in the universe, the changeless fact bespeaking the absolute.' John A. Hodgson, 'The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*', *ELH* 42.4 (1975), p. 595, pp. 595-622.

[132] Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975), p. xix.

[133] Newey, p. 169.

[134] James Rieger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (New York: George Brazillier, 1967), p. 221.

than an achieved work of art.[135] *The Triumph of Life* grows out of the rapid intensity of ideas he tests in his letter to John Gisborne where the meaning of life, art, and being is explored in Shelley's dark vision. *Adonais* seems similarly engaged in creating itself from the dialogue between himself and Keats. The risk-taking poem challenges the conventions of elegy in a tribute to his dead peer as Shelley continues their conversation by constructing *Adonais* on the advice offered by Keats. Both *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life* outpace and outflank critical constructions as they defy simple classification, reaching instead 'darkly, fearfully, afar' (*Adonais*, 55. 492) in their remarkable movement to get beyond 'this narrow good' (*Letters: PBS* II. p. 406).

[135] 'It has finality about it; for all its unfinished state it is the most finished, the most ruthlessly and objectively realized of all Shelley's visions'. Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, Yale Studies in English: Volume 141 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 220-21.