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" THIS VALLEY OF PERPETUAL DREAM "
A CLOSE COMMENTARY ON SHELLEY'S
"THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
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FOREWORD

"The Triumph of Life" is a cryptic final work for Shelley to leave to posterity. It is both unlike and yet like his previous work. It is unlike in that it addresses itself to the non-ideal, to a cruel and devastating present existence.¹ It is like in that it displays that "tough-minded" Shelleyan scepticism that C. E. Pulos has elucidated so well.² The Shelley who wrote the final line of "Mont Blanc", who included the famous last speech of Demogorgon in Prometheus Unbound, is in this poem given full rein. The debate still rages as to whether he allows any idealism into "The Triumph of Life" at all.

This closely structured poem, full of gripping images that remain with one long after the poem has been read, is Shelley at his best. In it, the poet who wrote the "Ode to the West Wind" brings his deep concern with the nature of life to fruition. The issues that emerge from an analysis of the text reflect this concern with the fundamentals of existence. For this reason, I believe it to be - despite its fragmentary nature - a great document on modern life.

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The purpose of this thesis is to provide an apparatus with which to read Shelley's final poem. To this end, I first present a concise summary of the major critical writings on the poem from this century,

¹ Perhaps only The Cenci approaches the same degree of disillusionment.

² C. E. Pulos, The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954).

to give a context for my own reading, which follows. In my commentary, I intend to show that Shelley began by depicting life as being characterised by a lack of absolute knowledge due to our faulty and limited sense perception. He paints a world in which reality is seen rather as layered experience, with dreams and shadows simply a different level within this experience. Human consciousness is controlled by desire, which is the means through which Life assaults us. Life is a corrupting, enervating force, but Shelley wished to show the moral duty of the individual to resist this weakening and to promote the naturally good, humanistic abilities in self and others. However, as the poem progresses, Shelley's images set up a situation that Shelley himself cannot see a way out of. The process of the poem depicts a greater power inevitably subsuming a lesser power; this process is repeated on a larger and larger scale until total loss of individuality results. Virtually all of Shelley's poetic images in the poem are drawn into this process, and having set it up, Shelley cannot see a way out of it, and is forced to cease writing.

The poem depicts the life of a strong individual involved in this process. Rousseau's account is a reliving of his conscious life up to the 'present' of the poem. Rousseau recalls his 'awakening' into consciousness in a manner that suggests both Keatsian and Lacanian theories of human development. His personality ~~dictates~~ the means by which he is ushered into mature life: the Shape all light seduces his willing senses, and appeals to his philosophy that trusts intuitive nature over reason. The critical point about this experience is that it is inevitable; all individuals must leave childhood and move into an adult, mature apprehension of the nature of life. The Shape all light is related to every stage of the power

progression in the poem, and as such is the means through which Rousseau grows.

Rousseau describes the phantom-making of the multitude around the chariot in a narrative that closely resembles the speaker's perception of the crowd at the beginning of the poem. In both accounts, it becomes apparent that the individuals in the crowd are creating their own destruction by making and reifying 'phantoms' of belief, which then turn upon their creators and persecute them. Indeed, the desire that is at the centre of human consciousness, and that initiates this tragedy, is conversely the instigator of all the positive impulses in mankind, the 'going-out' of one's self that Shelley speaks of. This tragedy is the final irony of life: not only is corruption inevitable and self-created, but it also mocks and denigrates the goodness in our human spirit.

The poem begins by emphasising the speaker's responsibility to act effectively in this world. However, by the end of Rousseau's account of life as ironic tragedy, the speaker's sense of moral responsibility has become an exercise in futility. His final question demonstrates this on several levels. Shelley's original intention of purposeful action amidst the corruption has itself been corrupted in the poem.

* * * *

I would like to end this brief foreword by acknowledging the influence and assistance of my supervisor for this thesis, Dr. Greg Crossan. His cool-headed, reasoned and objective readings of the Romantics that yet remained open to the often intense feeling in the poetry were immensely refreshing, and first attracted me to these poets. He initially directed me towards this poem as a thesis topic, and has helped clarify the issues and problems ever since. Thanks, Greg.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	ii
Critical History	1
Close Commentary	30
Conclusions	136
Bibliography	140

A CRITICAL HISTORY.

The critical history of "The Triumph of Life" is characterised by both the diversity and the challenge of its readings. The diversity is apparent in readings that range across a broad variety of approaches, and that reach often wildly conflicting conclusions. The challenge lies in the fact that most of these readings are comprehensive and coherent, giving consistent accounts of the poem that cannot be simply dismissed. The reader of such a history moves from bewilderment to a sense of exciting diversity, and, moreover, begins to suspect that this was Shelley's intention for the poem.

The fact that the poem remains unfinished certainly contributes to the openness of its interpretation. Likewise, the fact that it is Shelley's final work (even though through sheer accident) gives it the significance of being Shelley's 'last word'. In this necessarily brief overview of the major discussions on the poem, I have chosen Yeats' seminal essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", published in 1900, as the chronological starting point, and have examined the various writings through to 1988. It has become apparent that two philosophical schools of thought have dominated the criticism of the poem during this time: firstly, that of idealism, usually of a neo-platonic variety, and secondly, that of post-structuralism. The former is the central issue for most interpreters up until the late 1960's and early 1970's (who either support or react against it), and then the latter approach begins to emerge as a preferred reading strategy. The range

of responses within these broad philosophical arguments is nevertheless very wide, and there are interpretations that use neither argument. In this study I will focus on these two areas to outline the main responses to "The Triumph of Life". Rather than follow a chronological order, I have preferred to place the various commentaries in relation to each other according to their response to the poem.

I should perhaps point out at this juncture that the New Critics' contributions to this history are virtually non-existent. Leavis labelled the poem a "bewildering phantasmagoria",³ and T. S. Eliot found it one of the few acceptable pieces that Shelley wrote,⁴ but apart from these rather terse comments Shelley's last poem rates little mention. The New Critics' discrediting of Shelley has itself been discredited as simplistic and reactionary, and at any rate adds little to any discussion on this poem.

I. Idealist Approaches

This mode of criticism has dominated most discussion on Shelley, though since C. E. Pulos' landmark study The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism, the way has opened up for more sceptical readings of Shelley's poetry and philosophy. A very

³ F. R. Leavis, Revaluation, (London, 1936). Cited in Nancy Fogarty's Shelley in the Twentieth Century: A Study of the Development of Shelley Criticism in England and America, 1916-1971, Romantic Reassessment, 56 (Salzburg: Institut fur Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1976), p.138.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Talk on Dante", The Adelphi, 27 (1st Quarter, 1951), 110-112. Cited in Harold Bloom's Shelley's Mythmaking (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959; rpt. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), p.223. (Hereafter referred to as Bloom.)

simple description of the basic assumptions behind the idealistic readings of "The Triumph of Life" follows. Like Plato, Shelley saw life as a series of dim, distorted reflections of an ideal reality beyond life - Plato's shadows in the cave. Plato believed that the ideal reality could be perceived in life, through the use of 'pure reason'. Shelley rather felt that the ideal could be perceived and finally achieved in life through the 'poetic impulse'. Shelley's neoplatonism is therefore tempered by his belief in a Godwinian perfectibility, the hope that humanity could usher in the apocalyptically perfect world of Prometheus Unbound.

This basic philosophical belief is used as a departure point for a broad spectrum of interpretations of "The Triumph of Life", ranging from supremely optimistic to utterly pessimistic. At the positive end of the spectrum we find W. B. Yeats' essay, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry".⁵ Yeats outlines Shelley's strong desire for a new, divine order based on Intellectual Beauty, which can only be brought about by a regeneration in the heart of each individual. There are forces for and against this regeneration, and "The Triumph of Life" depicts the negative forces in Rousseau's account of the phantoms. Yeats elucidates Shelley's symbols in a totally platonic mode, and many of these apply to "The Triumph". The sun is the source of tyranny in life; the moon is beautiful but death-like; the morning/evening star is a symbol for all that Shelley holds as good.

A. C. Bradley's "Notes on Shelley's 'The Triumph

⁵ W. B. Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" in Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1901), pp.65-95.

of Life' ",⁶ published in 1914, is the first to establish Shelley's sources in Petrarch and particularly Dante, and also to trace the echoes from Shelley's earlier works. In foregrounding the links with these early Renaissance Christian writers, Bradley establishes his belief that Shelley was tending towards Christianity himself. His reading illuminates much that is cryptic in the poem, such as the reference to Plato's love for the boy Aster, and the physical geography of Rousseau's dream. He also, as Bloom points out, begins the prevalent reading of the Shape all light as a manifestation of the Ideal, and her obliteration of Rousseau's thoughts as "the effect of a revelation of the ideal in obliterating the modes of thought and feeling habitual before that revelation" (p.454). This interpretation reveals the central assumptions of neo-platonism and the perfectibility of the pure and strong.

F. Melian Stawell also adopts this very optimistic neo-platonic structure in her essay "Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'".⁷ Stawell sees the poem as a "grave and warning appeal to the will" (p.110) to master the dangerous passion of love. She outlines the heavy Faustian influence on the poem via Goethe, but believes that for Shelley it is only a matter of time before the "true sun" will emerge as the "Principle of Good" (p.116). The captives are all noble men whose potential has been denied. Rousseau's Shape all light represents the Supreme Good, but Rousseau is too impure to drink of her cup worthily, and so is overcome by it. Finally, though, Stawell

⁶ A. C. Bradley, "Notes on Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life' ", MLR, IX (October, 1914), 441-456.

⁷ F. Melian Stawell, "Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life' ", Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, V (1914), rpt. 1966, pp.104-131.

indicates the numerous hints of a "deeper life" that run through the poem, to conclude that the poem would have ended with "a vision in which the Conqueror would be conquered" (p.130).

Kenneth Cameron, in his essay entitled "The Social Philosophy of Shelley",⁸ proposes that Shelley believed in an historical evolution; that history was "essentially a struggle between...the forces of liberty and the forces of despotism" (p.512). For Shelley, the forces of liberty had been permanently released during his lifetime, and he believed that humanity was moving inexorably on to a perfect society. In 1974, Cameron examines "The Triumph of Life" in the light of this argument, in The Golden Years.⁹ "One can assume, then," he writes, "that the overall social philosophy of Shelley's works from Queen Mab to Charles the First also underlies 'The Triumph of Life'" (p.453). Cameron focusses on the captives and the multitude around the chariot, whose obsession with power and wealth blinds them to the benignant power around them which could change their situation if they willed it. Rousseau's dream is of his birth, and then of his perception of the nature of the world; the Shape all light reveals this to him so that he can plunge into life and change it, even though it deforms him. So Cameron reads the work as describing the ways to break down the evils preventing us from progressing along the path of historical evolution.

Neville Rogers, in Shelley At Work: A Critical

⁸ Kenneth Neill Cameron, "The Social Philosophy of Shelley", The Sewanee Review, L, 4 (Autumn, 1942), rpt. in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp.511-519.

⁹ Kenneth Neill Cameron, Shelley: The Golden Years (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp.445-474.

Enquiry,¹⁰ follows a similar line. The captives around the chariot are those who have fallen short of their ideal, because the world has seduced and corrupted them with 'blood and gold'. Rogers believes that "The Triumph" would have ended optimistically, showing that escape from corruption was possible. He interprets Shelley's last letters as looking forward to the future with hope.

A recent optimistic and idealistic reading of the poem is Fred Milne's "The Eclipsed Imagination in Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'",¹¹ published in 1981. Although Milne does not mention neo-platonic philosophy, the assumptions of a Blakean, humanistic ideal are the basis of this reading. Milne argues that "The Triumph of Life" explores what happens when an individual displaces the light of the imagination with the light of the intellect as the principal mode of knowledge. Milne contends that "The Triumph" reiterates "one of the central ideas in A Defence of Poetry" (681): the need for the imagination to guide the reason. Imagination is symbolized in the poem as the sun, which the speaker rejects and so invokes a vision of life under the aegis of the moon, the symbol for reason. The captives are all the product of the reason usurping imagination. Similarly, Rousseau rejects the Shape all light, who is part of the ideal world, because his reason demands answers to questions of selfhood. He must undergo a purgatorial reliving of life to learn his mistake, a mistake which Milne believes the speaker will learn from.

Exemplary of the contradictory responses to this

¹⁰ Neville Rogers, Shelley At Work: A Critical Enquiry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

¹¹ Fred Milne, "The Eclipsed Imagination in Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", SEL, 21 (1981), 681-702.

poem, the commentary by Roland A. Duerksen in Shelley's Poetry of Involvement¹² shows a similar humanistic idealism to that in Milne's essay, but arrives at a very different reading of the poem. Duerksen believes Shelley's philosophy was based on two precepts: "the freedom of the individual mind to make its own choices", and that same mind's responsibility to promote equal freedom amongst all human beings (p.6). This fusion of rationalism and social responsibility was effected through love, a self-generated "urge toward union or community with another" (p.32). Duerksen believes that "The Triumph" upholds this doctrine, by showing how humanity imprisons itself by refusing to trust the mind as the instrument to freedom. The chariot of Life is a mental construct, a result of this limited vision. 'Real life is available to humanity, if each individual will trust to his or her own reason. Thus, what Milne sees as the cause of corruption, Duerksen sees as the saviour.

Perhaps the most comprehensive presentation of an optimistic, neo-platonic reading of the poem is Donald Reiman's Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study.¹³ Like Duerksen, Reiman believes Shelley's basic philosophy was the right and duty of every individual to rule his own destiny and to seek his own and others' happiness. Reiman is more pessimistic as to the possibility of this happening: he cites Shelley's scepticism as indicating the poet's awareness that the ideal may be illusory. In "The Triumph of Life", the sad realities of Life are

¹² Roland A. Duerksen, Shelley's Poetry of Involvement (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

¹³ Donald H. Reiman, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 55 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

contrasted with the possibilities open to man if he exercises his will and liberates himself from external Necessity and personal passions. Rousseau's mistake was to seek the eternal in the mortal, notably the Shape all light; inevitably he was disappointed and awakened rather to a knowledge of evil. While Reiman sees Shelley's problem as the idealist's difficulty of maintaining a vision of the Ideal whist living in flawed reality, he is nevertheless assuming that the ideal is a positive option. "Everywhere in 'The Triumph of Life' the dark side of human experience is balanced by positive alternatives" (p.84).

Desmond King-Hele, in Shelley: His Thought and Work,¹⁴ believes that Shelley wished to show how we can triumph over our present travails in life. He speculates that the Dantean influence in the poem meant that Shelley was intending to end "The Triumph of Life" with a Paradiso, so bringing it into line with the earlier Prometheus Unbound. King-Hele is heavily influenced by the earlier, important reading by Carlos Baker in his book Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision.¹⁵ Baker acknowledges the difference between "The Triumph" and Shelley's earlier poetry, in the detached speaker and in the focus on worldly life to the almost complete exclusion of divine life. He outlines Shelley's growing sense of the corrupting forces in society, and concludes that the poem shows only three ways to escape such forces: early death, withdrawal from society, or forming a new society of like-minded individuals. Death is chosen for Shelley.

¹⁴ Desmond King-Hele, Shelley: His Thought and Work, 3rd ed. (1960; rpt. Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision (1948; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1961).

Baker's reading was not the first of the more pessimistic commentaries on "The Triumph of Life". Carl Grabo, in The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought¹⁶ gives a strongly autobiographical background to the poem, emphasising the tremendous difficulties Shelley faced in his later life. Again, a strong neo-platonic atmosphere is invoked: the world is utterly corrupted but a Divine Reality exists, of which the Shape all light is the guardian. She gives Rousseau a vision of Life as it really is, and as Grabo believed Shelley saw it. The poem illustrates, for Grabo, Shelley's rejection of the world for a reality of the mind, an inner life of thought that was intuitively neo-platonic.

Along autobiographical lines, two others pursue Grabo's approach to the poem. G. M. Matthews, in his 1962 essay "On Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'"¹⁷ sees the ultimate enemy of the natural order in society, as depicted in the poem, as "the acquisitive principle, the pursuit of self interest" (p.128). Matthews proposes that Shelley felt that his love for Jane Williams had become a selfish passion, an example of the opportunism depicted in the poem. Positive, beautiful life was available, but was too often submerged under self-gratification. Rousseau stands as a monitorial example of this, and the speaker relives his experience to the point of decision. Matthews suggests that a positive choice is difficult to make, as it was for Shelley.

A second semi-biographical reading within the idealist framework is offered by Charles E. Robinson

¹⁶ Carl Grabo, The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

¹⁷ G. M. Matthews, "On Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", Studia Neophilologica, XXXIV, (1962), 104-134.

in Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight.¹⁸ Robinson believes that Shelley devised "The Triumph" as the seventh and final book in Petrarch's series, and that the 'Life' of the title was really Life-in-Death, or a purgatorial existence. Shelley, Robinson suggests, was terrified of death, because he feared he would not reach the blissful immortality of the sacred few, but would be condemned to an afterlife still enslaved by Life. Robinson associates this with Shelley's sense of failure beside Byron's success.

This is an appropriate moment to mention C. E. Pulos' book The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism,¹⁹ a brilliant exposition of Shelley's sceptical empiricism and pseudo-platonic faith. Pulos shows how the poet's empirical and Humean background convinced him that certain, absolute knowledge was impossible, and yet Shelley's intuition made him simultaneously hope for an ideal beyond this existence. In "The Triumph of Life", Pulos attempts to argue, Shelley reconciles this conflict dramatically by having the speaker (Shelley as himself) take on the role of the detached spectator. The 'sacred few' represent the Ideal, but the speaker is not one of them; he is rather tied to the sceptical, empiricist world of Life.

What is becoming apparent in this overview is the way these different interpretations range across a spectrum from optimism to pessimism. Peter Butter, in a short article that attempts to make sense of these varying interpretations,²⁰ concludes that each of the central images of the poem - the Sun, Rousseau's

¹⁸ Charles E. Robinson, Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Op. cit.

²⁰ Peter Butter, "Sun and Shape in Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", RES, 13 (1962), 40-51.

birth, the Shape all light - carries ambiguities which must simply be acknowledged and accepted. In the world of "The Triumph", Butter says, the Ideal is transitory and remote, and full knowledge of it is impossible in this life.

Perhaps the final extreme on the spectrum of the idealist readings is represented by Ross Woodman's 1964 book, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley.²¹ Woodman believes that Shelley became more repulsed by the material world of humanity, because it kept him from the eternal. This explains his movement from moral reform to visionary poetry. Woodman presents an interesting dilemma: Shelley finally had to acknowledge Plato's rejection of poets, and so Shelley's own visionary poetry turns and condemns itself. Woodman therefore sees "The Triumph" as Shelley's recantation of poetry because it ties him to temporality. The imagination is rejected because it can only depict in mortal images: Rousseau's Shape all light is eternity clothed in mortal form, and so holds Rousseau in mortality. Woodman believes that the battle in Shelley between transcendence and incarnation is finally won by the former.

Idealistic, neo-platonic structures provide a popular and often useful mode by which to read Shelley's poetry. In the group of commentators whom I wish to discuss next, there is a strong sense in which the writers have used idealistic structures only to react against them. Idealism is taken as a point of departure, and is dismantled. Once again, these responses range from pessimism to optimism.

Perhaps one of the most idiosyncratic readings of "The Triumph of Life" is Harold Bloom's Shelley's Mythmaking, later developed in The Visionary Company:

²¹ Ross Grieg Woodman, The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964).

A Reading of English Romantic Poetry and Percy Bysshe Shelley.²² Bloom rejects the proposition that the poem is Shelley's recantation; he sees it rather as promoting an 'apocalyptic humanism' of a Blakean nature, in which man is perfected through his own imaginative poetic impulse. The hierarchy of lights in the poem depicts the hierarchy of influences over humanity: the stars of night are imagination, the sun and Shape all light are the light of nature, and the light of the chariot is that of Life. Each in turn destroys the former, and Rousseau falls from divinity, through nature, into life.

Bloom's reading is pivotal in that he proposes the possibility that Shelley is parodying his idealistic sources in the Bible, Dante, Milton and Blake. What distinguishes him from his legacy of pessimistic readings in Grabo, Baker and Pulos is his rejection of an idealistic, neo-platonic framework to explain the poem. He rather uses his Blakean model based on the philosophical system of Martin Buber, in which mortal relationships are either in the merging dialectic of an 'I-Thou' structure, or else in a binary opposition of 'I-It'. Bloom believes "The Triumph of Life" shows the absence and therefore illusoriness of the 'I-Thou' myth: Life is rather a

²² Harold Bloom, op.cit.; The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poets, 2nd ed. (1961; rpt. Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1971); Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985). Since the writing of this thesis, a later development in Bloom's reading of "The Triumph" has come to my attention, in Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). This focusses on Shelley as being torn between "Limitation", in which he interprets the world through the images of his father-figure, Wordsworth, and "Representation", in which he attempts to rebel against that state of creative "castration" by appropriating a Wordsworthian image and using it in a totally new, self-created context.

bleak 'I-It' series of relationships. How this accords with Bloom's "apocalyptic humanism" remains unstated.

Edward Bostetter presents a far more straightforward reaction against idealism in his reading of the poem in The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron.²³ Disenchantment, for Bostetter, is the dominant tone of the poem. Shelley shows how ideal symbols, such as the Shape all light, corrupt the notion of the ideal by their delusory and transitory nature. Rousseau, and by extension Shelley, fall victim to their own idealism - the inevitable lot of the poet. Bostetter concludes: "Could it be that the vision of life is the ultimate reality, and the dream of the ideal the illusion?" (p.189).

Miriam Allott makes a similar response to the poem in "The Re-working of a Literary Genre: Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'".²⁴ Allott sees the poem as a dialogue of the mind with itself, in which two autobiographical narratives (the speaker's and Rousseau's) correspond with, and yet comment and expand on, each other. For both, life is a negative, amoral force that imprisons humanity, leaving death as the only escape. Shelley's sense of moral responsibility is blighted with an awareness that all action is parodied and corrupted.

John Hodgson provides a very different anti-idealist approach to the poem in his essay "'The World's Mysterious Doom': Shelley's 'The Triumph of

²³ Edward E. Bostetter, The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, 2nd ed. (1963; rpt. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1975).

²⁴ Miriam Allott, "The Reworking of a Literary Genre: Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", in Essays on Shelley, ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp.239-278.

Life'".²⁵ He is the first to read the poem as a vision of the afterlife: Rousseau's dream is a movement from the sleep of death into a dream of remembered childhood innocence, and thence awakening into the afterlife, which turns out to be a purgatorial reliving of life. Hodgson believes this view of an afterlife reveals the nature of mortal life as being inevitable corruption. This shows Shelley's intense pessimism.

Another commentator who approaches the extremes of cynicism in his anti-idealistic reading is James Rieger in The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley.²⁶ Rieger sees Shelley as a follower of the gnostic heresies of the early Christian church; his utter scepticism leads him to deliberate contradictoriness and obscurantism, and his profound questioning of the efficacy of life and art results in his eventual suicide. Rieger sees "The Triumph of Life" as effectively Shelley's suicide note.

In a refreshingly different commentary to the above anti-platonic readings of Shelley, Jerome J. McGann presents another option to what he sees as an 'either/or' situation in Shelleyan criticism. In his essay "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after Hellas", he writes: "Most critics seem to have accepted implicitly the idea that only two approaches are available to Shelley's last poem; either it was intended to be a reaffirmation of the Titanic Promethean myth of hope, or it was meant to depict the rejection not only of that myth, but of the possibility of poetry, and of a meaningful life as

²⁵ John A. Hodgson, "'The World's Mysterious Doom': Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", ELH, XLII, 4 (Winter, 1975), 595-622.

²⁶ James Rieger, The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York: Braziller, 1967).

well."²⁷ McGann rather suggests that Shelley had come to see the inadequacy and divisiveness in idealism, and that he had accepted mortality and imaginative life in the present world. Rousseau in "The Triumph" could not do this: he exalted himself above mortality in an effort to confront 'the Absolute', and was therefore punished by Life, who removed his perception of mortal beauty. The poet-narrator, McGann suggests, rejects Rousseau's path, and is prepared to accept mortal beauty, as the first forty lines of the poem show.

In Merle Rubin's commentary on the poem, "Shelley's Skepticism: A Detachment Beyond Despair",²⁸ Shelley's scepticism is taken to its logical conclusion, and places both idealistic hope and empirical life in equal doubt. Shelley gives us a detached spectator, who reserves final judgement on everything, and is protected from the relativity of externality by 'an adamantine veil' that shields such a spectator's heart and preserves him. Such a spectator can therefore see value in both the One and the Many, in unity and diversity. Rubin thus sees an optimistic light in "The Triumph" and believes that Shelley may well have ended the poem with a transformation scene in which the spectator could act effectively. The speaker is different to Rousseau, who accepted a faith when he accepted the Shape all light's cup of Nepenthe. Rubin states that the only faith for Shelley is scepticism, or the lack of faith, "for to embrace any doctrine or philosophical system is to submit to limitation" (p.367).

²⁷ Jerome J. McGann, "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after Hellas", Keats-Shelley Journal, 15 (1966), 25-41.

²⁸ Merle R. Rubin, "Shelley's Skepticism: A Detachment Beyond Despair", Philological Quarterly, 59 (1980), 353-373.

Before leaving this overview of idealist and anti-idealst approaches to Shelley's poem, I should mention Edward Duffy's fascinating historiographical reading in Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment.²⁹ Duffy sees the poem as a Shelleyan exercise in historical revisionism, in which Rousseau's notorious nineteenth century reputation as the initiator of the French Revolution is shown to be inaccurate. Rather, Shelley shows how the false ethos of the Enlightenment led both Rousseau and the Revolution astray, because it addressed only one level of the human psyche - the reason - and denied deeper levels of consciousness. Duffy proposes that Rousseau's denial of his ability to tap one of those deeper levels in 'reverie' is the reason for his 'fall': he is frightened of the Shape all light's offering of sublime reverie and clings to rationality with his questions. Duffy reads Rousseau as a dramatic monologuist trying to justify his actions but constantly betraying himself. His failure of poetic faculty becomes the failure of Europe.

II. Metaphoric Approaches

I use the word 'metaphoric' here to describe a general trend in criticism that focusses on Shelley's concern with language and representation. This trend is as broad in scope as the idealist readings, but central to it is the function of language as a paramount theme in interpreting Shelley's poetry. Such

²⁹ Edward Duffy, Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979).

readings have dominated the last decade of Shelleyan criticism, and they are particularly applicable to "The Triumph of Life".

One of the earliest studies to use this approach is Jerome J. McGann's article, "Shelley's Veils: A Thousand Images of Loveliness".³⁰ Written five years after his earlier interpretation, this essay looks at Shelley's use of one of his favourite poetical concepts, the veil. McGann distinguishes three different kinds of Shelleyan veil: the old, outmoded ideas which hide the true beauty of life; the veil which Nature uses to clothe the world in beauty; and finally the veil of poetry which covers over the intuitive visions of the poet. McGann concludes that Shelley came to the realisation that the deep truth or ideal can never be achieved, because each stripping away of a veil in the first category, through poetry, necessarily involves a re-veiling of words. Nevertheless, for McGann this is not a cause for despair: "the process is itself the crucial thing, for if words are helplessly ineffectual and metaphorical, the activity of continuous and related image-making reveals the self-creative powers of the mind..." (p.206). In this way McGann links this essay with his earlier work, by showing how the very limitations of this existence are also the means to celebrate creative human ability.

While this is a far cry from the later post-structuralist readings of Paul de Man and Hillis Miller, the essay indicates the emerging focus on Shelley's interest in image-making as a constant process. McGann sees this as a positive process, the only attribute in life that approximates Shelley's

³⁰ Jerome J. McGann, "Shelley's Veils: A Thousand Images of Loveliness", in Romantic and Victorian, ed. W. Paul Elledge and Richard L. Hoffmann (Cranbury, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), 198-218.

earlier ideal realm. Lisa Steinman is another critic who foregrounds this process as a positive thing. In "From 'Alastor' to 'The Triumph of Life': Shelley on the Nature and Source of Linguistic Pleasure"³¹ Steinman examines Shelley's philosophical theory, as outlined in his prose, to conclude that Shelley believed the fundamental human desire is to locate our origins and source - our ignorance of which creates a void in our existences. Our search, using words and poetry, can only create images which reflect that void, like Shelley's recurring chasm image - "an image of a lack of images, one which emblematizes the mind's bafflement - the failure of thought and language" (p.26). We can never get a glimpse or image of the actual source. Rousseau's failure in "The Triumph", Steinman argues, is that he realises the futility of the search, and gives up the quest of constant image-making when he accepts the Shape all light's cup of Nepenthe. The only way to keep from being overwhelmed by Life is to refuse to acknowledge the futility of the search process, as the speaker does in his final question which shows he does not understand Rousseau. Steinman ends by admitting that "love and poetry depend on self-deception of a sort" (p.33).

Angela Leighton also focusses on the sense of loss that gives rise to image-making in her book entitled Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems.³² Leighton finds a distinction in Shelley's writing between 'the original intense 'appreciation of life'" (p.152) and the actual process of living. The latter inevitably brings about the loss

³¹ Lisa M. Steinman, "From 'Alastor' to 'The Triumph of Life': Shelley on the Nature and Source of Linguistic Pleasure", Romanticism Past and Present, 7 (1983), 23-36.

³² Angela Leighton, Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

of the former. Shelley illustrates this process in "The Triumph of Life" through the series of wakings which both the speaker and Rousseau undergo, wakings that suppress what went before. Forgetfulness becomes the keynote of the poem, a forgetfulness that is 'threaded' with memory. Like Steinman, Leighton believes in the search for origins, but in her reading, the searcher fails because of this oblivion which erases experience as soon as it has happened. The resulting sense of loss makes the imagination manufacture images in an effort to remember, and so the act of forgetting becomes inspirational. Rousseau, unfortunately, is unable to recognise this ability, and so lives in loss. Nevertheless, Leighton insists that the "act of commemoration" (p.175) is the real triumph in the poem.

Jean Hall's thesis in The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetry³³ also adopts a positive interpretation of Shelleyan language theories. She retraces Shelley's philosophical roots in British empiricism and Godwinism to show that Shelley saw the impossibility of an ontology as exhilarating and freeing. Poetry can dissolve the meaning-through-habit process that is our usual experience by applying new contexts to static visual images in the poetry, so creating a new, unified perspective. This is not a platonic, transcendent unity, but a self-created, language-conceived, constantly changing unity. Hall applies this rather sketchily to "The Triumph of Life", arguing that the hell of illusion in which the multitude and Rousseau are immersed is a result of their misuse of the 'transforming images', and as such is self-created. She believes that the Shape all light is such an

³³ Jean Hall, The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetry (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

image, and if Rousseau could alter his perception he could use her to transform his context into a heaven. His failure to do so is a warning to the speaker, whose world will be what he makes it.

The tendency with these representational readings is towards a growing pessimism. Tillottama Rajan's book Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism³⁴ could be placed at an intermediate point on the spectrum, exploring as it does deconstruction in the Romantics. Rajan defines deconstruction as a dismantling of the overt, authorized meaning of the text by a subconscious meaning that runs counter to the authorized meaning, thus revealing disunity and potential collapse.³⁵ The Romantics' 'text' of the idealizing imagination is thus undermined by a subconscious subtext that shows their poetic constructions to be solipsistically-created and therefore unrelated to any reality. In her chapter on Shelley entitled "Visionary and Questioner: Idealism and Scepticism in Shelley's Poetry", Rajan argues that Shelley's idealism is not replaced by scepticism, but is rather postponed. In "The Triumph of Life", however, Shelley depicts a confrontation between a visionary and a sceptic, and as the poem proceeds, the subtext of doubt emerges and disrupts the text, rendering all the symbols ambiguous as they change in signification. The poem's process shows how good and bad are inextricably intertwined, and when both Rousseau and the speaker realise this, the need for a transcendent ideal is revised and life accepted. This achievement of 'purgatorial wisdom' releases one's

³⁴ Tillottama Rajan, Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980).

³⁵ Rajan cannot really be called a deconstructionist, however, as she locates this process as occurring only in some texts, and not as the fundamental character of all language-use.

creativity; we can be our own god, but to do so we must submit to the lasting misery of Life.

There is a strong case for including this reading in the 'anti-idealist' category of this critical history, and this very point indicates the rather arbitrary nature of the categories, and the interchange between them. I have included Rajan in this section, however, because of her focus on the shifting signification of language to reveal new perspectives.

Michael O'Neill approaches the same theme from a different path, suggesting that Shelley's method was to ask questions that mobilized the imagination into creative image-making. In "Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life': Questioning and Imagining",³⁶ O'Neill argues that the poem does not take a fixed stance, but by constant questioning, it tests its experiences. This takes the form of repeated image-making, and it is this process that gives the poem its energy and life. O'Neill focusses on several images in the poem to show how the vehicle of the metaphor is rich with possibilities (whether from ambiguity, or from links to previous literary sources), but the tenor is uncertain, and often absent. O'Neill argues that this is a deliberate method of Shelley's that springs from his awareness of the gap between experience and meaning. Shelley refuses to 'gloss his imaginings' (p.180), not from a sense of nihilism, but from a sense of freedom.

William Keach's penetrating analysis of Shelley's stylistic methods in Shelley's Style³⁷ does not give a

³⁶ Michael O'Neill, "Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life': Questioning and Imagining", in An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism, ed. J. R. Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the University of Durham, 1983).

³⁷ William Keach, Shelley's Style (New York and London: Methuen, 1984).

complete analysis of "The Triumph of Life", but does make several pertinent conclusions concerning it. Responding to de Man's comment that the poem's language makes random phonetic links (in rhyme) which also create semantic links, Keach argues that de Man effaces the role of poet in this process, and he asserts that Shelley's "compositional intelligence [was] fully in touch with the arbitrariness of its expressive medium yet capable of shaping that arbitrariness into, as well as according to, precisely provisional 'constraints of meaning'" (p.188). He gives this argument an unapologetically biographical background by showing how several important lyrics revealing Shelley's anxiety about personal relationships (such as "Lines written in the Bay of Lerici") are interjected in "The Triumph" manuscript between two crucial lines of Rousseau's: '...my words were seeds of misery - / Even as the deeds of others'" (ll.280-281). Keach points out that these lines can be interpreted in two ways: writing as a product of real suffering, or writing producing real suffering. Cause and effect between language and experience are blurred. These ambiguous lines juxtaposed with the above-mentioned lyrics suggest to Keach that Shelley's anxiety about relationships is linked with "an agitated uncertainty about writing, about verbal representation" (p.233). These times of anxiety, Keach believes, produce Shelley's most powerful poetry.

The seminal work for many of the above commentaries is Paul de Man's essay "Shelley Disfigured: 'The Triumph of Life'",³⁸ although de Man's reading is far more pessimistic than these, seeing as it does the deconstructive process in the poem as

³⁸ Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured: 'The Triumph of life'", in Deconstruction and Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom et. al. (New York: The Seabury Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

random and finally uncontrollable.

De Man begins by outlining the traditional human desire to understand the present by interpreting the past. As with the speaker and Rousseau, who ask questions, we all try to understand the meaning of the text (of our lives, or of the poem) by building up a series of meanings until we have frozen the text into a statue that we 'understand'. De Man calls this "monumentalization". He then shows how this is a false process for "The Triumph", which has gone through numerous drafts which alter meanings appreciably. This shows how monumentalization is illusory, because each question about meaning is forgotten, or effaced, as soon as it is asked. This 'defacement' is the central movement of the poem for de Man, and is exemplified in Rousseau, who begins from a position of self-knowledge, where his words and actions are unified, but who moves through a series of such defacements, until he arrives at the "unbearable condition of indetermination" (p.130), or not knowing. In the process he is physically defaced or disfigured as well. De Man argues that this is the same experience we have in trying to read "The Triumph"; figures created by language are undermined by language; causality and temporality are lost; "the meaning glimmers, hovers, and wavers, but refuses to yield the clarity it keeps announcing" (p.131). In thematising this endless process by which language disfigures itself, and our ineffectual attempts to prevent the process and glean a meaning, Shelley does not denounce, or celebrate, but simply recognizes, Life.

David Quint, another of the earliest representational critics, takes a different approach to de Man, in his essay "Representation and Ideology in 'The Triumph of Life'."³⁹ His central argument is

³⁹ David Quint, "Representation and Ideology in 'The Triumph of Life'", SEL, 18 (1978), 639-657.

that the imagination, with human love, is infinite, but the words by which such imaginative experiences are expressed are finite. Thus the free imagination is restricted and imprisoned in its very act of image-making, and worse, cannot see its restriction and begins to worship the images it has created. It is this "deformation of the imaginative experience into ideology" (p.639) that Quint identifies as the subject of "The Triumph of Life". Quoting the Essay on Love, Quint shows how our sense of an unconstituted selfhood initiates a desire for external self-representation: we create mental images, satisfying our infinite capacities with finite representation, and so suffocating our ability to continue image-making. This is the fault Rousseau slips into; he creates the Shape all light and then submits authority to her. It is also the speaker's mistake, who creates the image of Rousseau. Both fall prey to the Shape in the chariot, who stands for the principle of ideology. Finally, Quint challenges, the onus is on the reader to refuse to impose any ideology on his or her own reading of the poem.

Lloyd Abbey follows on from Quint's argument in his book published a year later, entitled Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism.⁴⁰ In it he states that Shelley was in a state of "almost total philosophical uncertainty" (p.7) throughout his career, and refused to embrace any dogma. Using Pulos' thesis that Shelley was split between intuitive idealism and scepticism, Abbey describes the poet as a 'preserver' (saving his intuitions in poetry) and yet also a 'destroyer' (undermining faith in images, in words and in poetry). Finally poetry is questioned as a false dogma, and this is the situation that Abbey

⁴⁰ Lloyd Abbey, Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

finds in "The Triumph of Life". In this poem, all images change and self-destruct, finally being subsumed into the natural cycle of day and night. They have no 'meaning', and even Shelley's images of the ideal are completely deconstructed. Abbey makes a faint suggestion that the acceptance of this situation frees Shelley's mind for moral action, but confirms that there is little evidence of this in the poem.

A philosophy of relativity is presented by Richard Cronin in his book, Shelley's Poetic Thoughts.⁴¹ Unlike "The Triumph's" sources, which, Cronin says, represent experience as series of veils removed via contemplation to reveal an absolute, perfect reality, in "The Triumph" no such reality is revealed when veils are removed. Rather, the world is labyrinthine, without ethical or metaphysical certainty. The lights in the poem have no hierarchical order, but alter meaning according to their relation with each other. Rousseau is an unreliable guide. The only absolute - the 'sacred few' - is crucially absent, and so its validity as an absolute is seriously questioned. Finally, states Cronin, the poem's value depends on whether the reader is prepared to accept its inconclusiveness.

In 1985, J. Hillis Miller published The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens,⁴² which included an essay written at the time of Paul de Man's essay. It outlines a reading very close to de Man's, as the two men collaborated in their discussions on the poem. Miller reveals the basic pattern of "The Triumph of Life" to be the perception of seemingly

⁴¹ Richard Cronin, Shelley's Poetic Thoughts (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981).

⁴² J. Hillis Miller, The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985).

binary opposites - such as day and night, power and misery, actor and victim - which are actually different versions of the same thing. When these oppositions merge, they annihilate each other, leaving a residue that begins the process again. Miller uses the image of 'folding' (as mentioned in the last line of the poem) to illustrate this process: a single entity is folded into two opposing entities, split and yet joined by the fold. This process of perception in which we see and name by oppositions, can continue forever, unbroken. Humanity becomes "the dupe of self-generated signs" (p.116).

Miller demonstrates the relativity and subjectivity of 'naming' by showing how the sun of the first forty lines of the poem is delineated by several simultaneously-developed personifications which are layered on top of each other. The final 'meaning' of the sun is unknown; it is assigned roles which are not "intrinsic to the element itself" (p.133) but which depend upon its relation to other elements. This process is the condition of life, and each renaming obliterates the previous name, in a kind of erasure or forgetting similar to de Man's. Rousseau's 'memories', Miller concludes, are extrapolations from his perception of his present: they are inferred namings. Similarly, the reader cannot escape this process of figuration, but can only enter into it and become its victim, renaming, erasing and renaming again.

It is appropriate to conclude this critical history by discussing Jerrold Hogle's extraordinarily subtle and extensive reinterpretation of Shelley's thought and writings in the recently published Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the

Development of His Major Works.⁴³ Hogle outlines Shelley's "shifting, evanescent" style in which figure moves into figure in abrupt transitions (p.3), and he combines this with Shelley's constant reference to a power or prime force that preexists human consciousness and will. Hogle rejects most Shelleyan commentaries which see Shelley's style as a symptom of his belief in a unified, centred power or force, whether of a quasi-platonic, linguistic or even Christian nature. Instead, Hogle suggests that Shelley rewrites the western ideas of the "One", presenting a decentred process of transference which both initiates and is enacted in human thought. In this transference each basic thought is a motion between other thoughts, arising out of past perceptions and looking forward to future perceptions. Shelley's writings evince this criss-crossing process, leaping from image to image as each transforms the last. This, for Shelley, is the "motion that produces mind", as the process also effaces itself, making only its product recognisable. This relational thinking "explodes the most conventional thought-relations into interconnections with others that were rarely thought to be analogous before. That disruption prepares the psyche, first to accept all possible relations between transferred thoughts... as genuine equals, and then to defer to what the self and others have yet to think and have yet to become..." (p.27). In short, it leads to selfless love.

In "The Triumph of Life" Hogle believes that

⁴³ Jerrold E. Hogle, Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Hogle's book only became available to me after my own interpretation of "The Triumph" had been written. There are, nevertheless, many similar conclusions in our readings, although Hogle's final thesis of the possibility of positive life through a new way of thought is obviously very different to my own.

Shelley brings together in the Shape all light all his previous figures for this new "One" of decentred process. She is "transference embodied" (p.323), as she changes from image into image in a constant movement of tropes. She is both the impulse to change and the change itself, and she also shows the forgetting that takes place as each new image emerges in her effect on Rousseau. He, as a shade in the afterlife, recalls his experience of her as a warning to the narrator of the poem. The terrible danger to the process of free transference is the wilful decision to objectify and fix thoughts, thus creating tyrannical external centres of perceived 'truth' that in turn prevent true transference. Rousseau's mistake was to see in the Shape all light an external centre of knowledge about himself. She offered full transference in the cup of Nepenthe, but he only sipped at it and so received only partial, perverted transference. Similar errors are seen in the followers and captives of the chariot of Life, who give off shadows in a constant transference of thoughts but who objectify those shadows into static, impenetrable versions that repress the people. Even the narrator has revealed this tendency to objectification and fallen thought in his description of the sunrise and the chariot of Life.

Hogle concludes that the Shape all light presents another option to this triumph of objective signs over shapes of thought. The self-effacing nature of her action, though, means that this option may never be noticed by narrator or reader. The poem's oscillation between these two options - "Life as a state of subjection to objective 'impressions'" or Life as "a revelling in transference without a longing for final knowledge" (p.338) - is never finally stilled.

* * * *

Hogle's reading concludes this brief critical

history. There are, no doubt, other commentators on "The Triumph of Life" who have not been included here; I have, however, endeavoured to discuss those whom I feel to be most useful. As we move into the close commentary that follows, more detailed aspects of the above readings will emerge.

A CLOSE COMMENTARY ON "THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"

I

It must be quite apparent by now that the readings of "The Triumph Of Life" are extremely diverse. None of Shelley's earlier work creates an equivalent atmosphere of possibility: "Alastor", for instance, which is often named as a companion-piece to "The Triumph of Life", is usually read as a pessimistic piece, with its only optimistic note occurring in the narrator's prologue. Other poems may sustain variant interpretations of minor aspects, but generally there is a consensus as to the final attitude of the poem - whether positive or negative (to use the crudest possible philosophical terms). "The Triumph of Life" has none of this finality. As we have seen, the readings vary from the optimistic neo-platonists to the near nihilistic deconstructionists. Both offer convincing proofs for their arguments. Shelley seems to deliberately cultivate this uncertainty - and, indeed, several later commentators point to this as being Shelley's central thesis in the poem.⁴⁴ While I feel that this uncertainty is a vital element in the poem, and that Shelley's scepticism had reached a stage in which he was beginning to question his idealistic faith, I cannot accept that it is the final thrust of the poem. (Indeed, how can readings that illustrate the non-finality of experience be accepted as final? Deconstructionists must, by definition and integrity, be prepared to deconstruct their own texts of deconstruction.) Shelley seems to me to be a man

⁴⁴ Notably Abbey, de Man, Miller, Rubin and Cronin.

whose social conscience never fails him, and whose sense of responsibility to his world remains prominent, jostling with his own personal crises of faith. This becomes evident in his letters: in the much-quoted one to Harold Smith on June 29th, 1822, Shelley states his belief that "things have now arrived at such a crisis" that "England appears to be in a desperate condition", and he goes on to say what must be done.⁴⁵ He "requires every man plainly to utter his sentiments on the inefficacy of the existing religious, no less than political, systems for restraining and guiding mankind." Yet he then continues, "I once thought to study these affairs and write or act in them - I am glad that my good genius said refrain." I will refer to this letter again, but this quotation is enough to indicate the area of interest I have in "The Triumph of Life". Shelley appears to depict a world in which unknowability - what Jean Hall calls "the inability to construct an ontology"⁴⁶ - is evident, and indeed is revealed to be a condition of life. However, he then goes on to ask: How then does one live? How does humanity attempt to live responsibly and socially in a world of corrupting relativism? The options he puts forward are almost all presented as impotent, and this, I feel, leads him to the despairing cry of anxiety at the end of the fragment, "'Then, what is Life?'" I suspect that it also leads to Shelley laying down his pen (quill?), uncertain as to the future of the poem. The storm off Viareggio made this pause a permanent one.

⁴⁵ The Complete Works of Shelley, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (New York: Gordian Press; London: Ernest Benn, 1965), vol. X, Letters 1818-1822, p.410. Hereafter referred to as Letters.

⁴⁶ Hall, p.12.

II (11. 1-40)

The first forty lines of the poem brilliantly introduce several central issues, some of which I have already mentioned. As Reiman⁴⁷ has shown, these lines were well revised by Shelley and had reached a fair-copy state. Hence we can accept that what Shelley has written was what he intended. This makes the ambiguities of the passage even more startling. Before we examine the lines, it is worth making the observation that one's reading of these opening lines generally dictates how one reads the poem as a whole. The prime area of concern is the morality of the sun in these lines. This question was first raised by Yeats, who saw the sun in general mythology as representing "sensitive life,...belief and joy and pride and energy... indeed, the whole life of the will,"⁴⁸ but who went on to say that in "The Triumph of Life" the sun's "power is the being and the source of all tyrannies." A later group of commentators⁴⁹ prefer to read the sun's role positively, pointing to Shelley's traditional mythological imagery as proof of this. Harold Bloom's landmark reading of the poem in Shelley's Mythmaking is one of the first modern commentaries to interpret the sun as a negative influence, seeing it as part of a hierarchical structure in which the light of the imagination (the

⁴⁷ Reiman, p.88.

⁴⁸ Yeats, p.93.

⁴⁹ Notably Baker and King-Hele.

stars) is obscured by the light of nature (the sun) which in turn is obscured by the light of Life (the chariot). Peter Butter attempts to mediate between these various extremes by simply allowing the sun's ambiguity.⁵⁰ From that reading on the discussion has moved into many variants of the same options. Reiman's schematic organization of Shelley's symbolic universe posits that the sun stands for the vivifying creative imagination, a pure white light that becomes refracted and distortive when it enters earth's atmosphere, and Fred Milne later endorses this reading.⁵¹ By and large, though, later readings have concentrated on the ambivalence of the sun in these lines, and the effect that ambivalence has.

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory and of good, the Sun sprang forth
Rejoicing in his splendour, and the mask
Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth.⁵²

Reiman writes: "Shelley has given his reader in the first two lines of "The Triumph of Life" an objective correlative that, when recognized, becomes a key to the theme" (p.21). He illustrates how those lines are an echo from Milton's Comus, and then extrapolates his meaning from the meaning of the lines in Comus. While the identification of the echo is arguably accurate, the extrapolation is tenuous, to

⁵⁰ Butter, pp.41-43.

⁵¹ Milne, p.683.

⁵² Shelley's "The Triumph of Life", ll.1-4. Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977). All further references to Shelley's poetry or prose, unless stated otherwise, will be taken from this edition, referred to as Shelley's Poetry and Prose. All further references to "The Triumph of Life" will cite line numbers in parentheses in the text.

say the least. It enables Reiman to conclude that "The sun is, in itself, a symbol of the Good" (p.23). The italics indicate Reiman's point that sublunary sunshine is corrupted, but the essential point is that the sun is finally a positive symbol.

It seems to me that Reiman has had to go to rather extreme lengths to prove this point. The echo from Comus is a simple matter of syntax and alliteration, and is the sort of thing that a poet with Shelley's ear for sound would hear and stow away in his memory for future use. Even if it is a deliberate borrowing, it does not necessarily indicate that any deeper semantic borrowing is also intended.

Certainly these opening lines are vivid and energizing in effect. The syntax deliberately creates this effect with emphases falling on the active verbs - "swift", "hastening", "sprang", "rejoicing" - and with the build-up to the climactic "Sun sprang forth". Shelley prefigures a Hopkinsesque sprung rhythm, varying the terza rima effectively by including more unstressed syllables for speed and vivacity, and restricting the number of syllables for a slower, more emphatic tempo.

The image of the sun as a spirit hastening forth in self-acknowledged splendour to perform his glorious duty is ostensibly a positive one. This would seem to be affirmed by the result it has - it removes the mask of darkness from the earth. As any reader of Shelley knows, masks are negative signs that hide ideal beauty and truth. In Prometheus Unbound the Spirit of the Earth relates how the "foul masks with which ill thoughts / Hide that fair being whom we spirits call man" fall from the people to reveal their true, beautiful natures (III.iv.45). This magnificent moment is typical of Shelley's use of the mask image. Here it appears to be used in a similar way: the Sun's glorious duty is to make the mask that disfigures the

earth in darkness, fall and reveal earth's natural beauty. The phrase "the awakened earth" is particularly reminiscent of Prometheus Unbound: in the scene from that poem prior to the above-mentioned, the Earth responds to Prometheus' kiss with the words: "'tis life, 'tis joy / And through my withered, old and icy frame / The warmth of an immortal youth shoots down" (III.iii.87-89). If Prometheus is, as many critics say he is, the light of the imagination - Reiman's Sun - the correlation fits nicely (and is more convincing than Reiman's Comus extrapolation).

So what ambiguities can exist in these lines to undercut this positive reading? On the surface it would seem there is very little, yet I suggest that problems are being planted for reaping in the following lines. The Sun has a task - and though it is both glorious and good, it remains nevertheless an enforced duty, and one that must be carried out every day. As Richard Cronin points out, this is all good Church of England theology; the Protestant work ethic in action.⁵³ More than this, though, is what this task means for the rest of nature. As we will see, the Sun's self-imposed duty is also imposed upon nature by the Sun. This is surely also reminiscent of Prometheus Unbound but this time of Jupiter's arrogant self-glorification:

Ye congregated Powers of Heaven who share
The glory and the strength of him ye
serve

Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent.
All else has been subdued to me.

(III.i.1-4)

The Sun similarly "rejoices in his splendour", and

⁵³ Cronin, pp.208-209.

that splendour surely includes his total omnipotence over nature. Whilst sharing in the "glory and good" of sunrise, nature must nevertheless also obey that sunrise. Indeed, a central theme of Prometheus Unbound - the unnecessary imprisoning of the imagination inside reified roles (man-god, prisoner-tyrant) - is also suggested here. Merle Rubin comments that, in imposing labour upon himself as well as nature, "[the Sun], too, is imposed upon, a characteristically Shelleyan touch in its insight that master and slave are equally oppressed by tyranny."⁵⁴

What these two opposing readings of the first four lines of "The Triumph of Life" indicate (among other things) is the danger of using other poems to interpret this one. Whilst this is an acceptable and indeed commendable practice in hermeneutics, it can lead to escalating difficulties - particularly in this poem where Shelley is emphasising uncertainty and multiple possibilities over finality and closure. Whether or not Shelley intentionally made these echoes to Prometheus Unbound is debatable. We all tend to have a set of images and vocabulary that is idiosyncratic and that recurs in our language-usage. Reiman's belief in Shelley's symbolic universe is, I think, too schematic and fixed: the proliferation of articles trying to demonstrate alternative models of consistency in Shelley's use of certain symbols is proof of this.⁵⁵ How much of Shelley's image-making is conscious and deliberate, and how much unconscious and 'associative', can never be finally known.

So the problem in reading these opening lines

⁵⁴ Rubin, p.361.

⁵⁵ Butter's is one such article; Jerome J. McGann's "Shelley's Veils: A Thousand Images Of Loveliness" is another. Indeed, Reiman himself is a perfect example.

remains. I believe that Shelley intended us to read them positively at first, playing upon our expectations of his images, but that he planted seeds of doubt that germinate in the following lines, and undercut that positive reading.⁵⁶ The Sun's addiction to his duty and his revelling in his glory make up one such seed. The 'mask' falling is another, though this works in a different way. We read the mask at first as being a simple negative, but I think that as the poem progresses this negativity becomes far more problematic, as it is revealed to be a central condition of existence. This idea will be explained more fully below.

The poem continues to describe the superlative sunrise in lines 5-20. The most notable feature of the language here is its religious, almost liturgical, nature. Altars flame without smoke, the ocean offers orisons, the birds offer matin lays and flowers "swing their censers". The possible interpretations of this natural worship are several. This may be a description of natural religion: nature offers recognition and praise of God via the Sun, who is both a type of, and minister to, God. Such a reading comes into direct confrontation with Shelley's well-professed agnosticism. Indeed, the one aspect of Christianity that Shelley did like was Christ, and the incarnate God is precisely the aspect of Christianity that natural religion denies. Another possible interpretation of the religious atmosphere is that adopted by Cronin:⁵⁷ the Sun is both the autocratic Jehovah of the Old Testament (note the sacrificial "altars" of 1.5), and the self-sacrificing Son/Sun of

⁵⁶ I do not wish to deny the obvious beauty of the scene described. To do so would be perverse to a degree. I wish to point out the less obvious, but far more important, ambivalences in the description.

⁵⁷ Cronin, p.209.

the New Testament (and here note the phrase "at the birth / Of light" which is suggestive of Christ's birth). He imposes tasks but simultaneously he devotes himself to a task of good. Yet this, too, is obviously ambivalent: while Shelley accepts the sacrificing love of Christ, he rejects the autocracy of the Father (again, compare Jupiter in Prometheus Unbound). Finally, of course, one could simply say that Shelley uses the language of religion to describe nature's reaction to the Sun, and that it has no theological significance whatsoever. This may be so, yet the dubious relationship between nature and the Sun still remains, a relationship that in all of his other writing Shelley finds abhorrent. The dutiful, blind devotion of a slave to a master inhibits personal freedom, whether or not this occurs in a religious or purely secular situation.

What is particularly disturbing about this relationship as Shelley describes it here, is the universality of it. In lines 16-20 he stipulates that all things that are "of mortal mould / Rise...to bear / Their portion of the toil which he.../....imposed upon them". This is a highly significant point in that it states clearly that everything mortal is subject to this relationship of tyranny. It seems to be contradicted immediately following though, when the speaker opts out of the relationship and chooses to turn his back (quite literally) on the rising sun. How can these divergent claims be reconciled? Does humanity still have the choice and ability to withstand the Sun's summons? This becomes a central question later on when, in the speaker's vision, we see the correlation between the Sun and the chariot of Life. Does the chariot have total power over humanity, or do we still have the choice, and ability, to withstand it?

Before leaving these lines (5-20), it is worth

noting the use of sensual imagery in them. We are given sight imagery (the coming of light, the flaming crimson), then sound imagery (the birds' matin lay), touch imagery (unclosing eyelids to the kiss of day) and finally smell imagery (orient and odorous sighs).⁵⁸ This is not the last time in this poem that Shelley tries to explain experience using a range of sensory descriptions. Reiman calls this technique the "effort of men to describe their apprehension of the One through impressions of the Many, attempts that must always end in some measure of failure."⁵⁹ I would take this explanation even further, and say that this use of multiple sense imagery emphasises Shelley's sceptical empiricism, which acknowledges that our knowledge is based on our faulty, limited sense-experiences, our sensations.⁶⁰ Hence Shelley's method of describing experience via a range of sensations. The important extension of this is, as Reiman's final phrase indicates, the inability to know anything finally. What causes our sensations is unknowable. So we arrive at Shelley's scepticism and the ethos of this poem. For Shelley, life is a matter of layered experiences. As we pull back the veil of one experience, expecting or hoping to find some meaning or truth behind it, we simply find another veil, another experience. We exist through layers of 'reality', each 'reality' proving to be no more 'real'

⁵⁸ See Reiman, p.23.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 106.

⁶⁰ See Pulos. By and large I accept Pulos' conclusions, with minor exceptions concerning his comments on "The Triumph of Life". I have also found Jean Hall's The Transforming Image invaluable in this area of Shelley's sceptical empiricism.

than a dream.⁶¹

I am here using the language of "The Triumph of Life" to illustrate the worldview of Shelley's writing at this time. In "The Triumph of Life" we peel back layer upon layer of 'reality': Rousseau's vision is within the speaker's vision, which is within Shelley's and the reader's vision. The blurring of boundaries between these 'layers' is evident - the speaker's sense of déjà vu about his vision seems to indicate that he has experienced it before, and Rousseau's vision of the past seems at its end to melt into the speaker's vision of the present. What this structure of "The Triumph of Life" reflects or illustrates is the sceptical empiricist view of experience; each layer of knowledge or experience is no more or less 'real' or absolute than the previous layer. And this, of course, brings us back to my point at the start of this Part; Shelley has created a poem that is quite deliberately 'unknowable' finally. As my explication of the first twenty lines of the poem has shown, many different interpretations are possible, and rather than seeing this quality as a semantic 'black hole' down which disappears any meaning, I prefer to see it

⁶¹ As Shelley himself says in a different context, "Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed." ("A Defence of Poetry", Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.500.) Shelley is here actually speaking about great poetry, and in effect is describing his own method in "The Triumph of Life". As we are seeing, the openness of this poem leads to a liberating sense of possibility, of numerous readings. Shelley goes on to say: "...after one person and one age has exhausted all [a poem's] divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed." ("Defence", p.500.) "The Triumph of Life" exemplifies exactly this process.

as allowing a liberating multiplicity of meanings.⁶²

All this takes us into the cryptic and extremely interesting lines 21-40, in which the speaker exerts his will to turn his back on the Sun's power and to explore the veils of experience. Lines 21-28 describe the speaker's position both mentally and physically. Many critics have speculated as to the nature of the "thoughts which must remain untold" (l.21). Reiman says that, because the vision that follows is a product of the speaker's imagination, the thoughts that have kept him awake through the night must be related to the vision. This seems a reasonable, if rather obvious, deduction. The problem of the nature of these thoughts lies, then, in one's interpretation of the vision. At this stage, though, I feel that such a point is irrelevant, or at least, unimportant: suffice it to say that his mind has been dwelling on the problems of existence and knowledge of the truth. What is more important is the speaker's attitude to the arrival of the Sun. Firstly one notes that the speaker identifies with the stars of the night. These stars have gemmed "the cone of night", the established explanation of this latter image being that it describes "the cone-shaped shadow (umbra) cast by earth away from the sun."⁶³ What is the effect of this identification? To use Reiman's own mythological schema, these stars symbolize human ideals, aspirations to the 'immutable realm of Being'.

⁶² The metaphysical questions behind such a comment are profound. Does one see this 'multiplicity of meanings' as indicating no final meaning in the end, or as indicating that many relative meanings are possible? The response to this situation of an absence of final meaning is ultimately dependent upon personal attitude.

⁶³ Footnote to the relevant lines of the poem in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.455. Duffy gives a comprehensive description of the phenomenon that Shelley is using here, on p.143.

Certainly, stars recur throughout "The Triumph of Life" and appear to be used in a positive way. Reiman's identification, though, again seems too arbitrary and definite. At this stage one can only say that the stars are very rapidly overcome by a more powerful light, and this is true of every other reference to stars in the poem.⁶⁴ Here they are "laid asleep" by the Sun, and so the speaker, who has identified himself with them rather than with the rest of day-loving nature, likewise prepares himself for sleep. Bloom says that this shows humanity to be more than simply natural; to be, in fact, outside nature. This implies a superiority in awareness, or at least mental ability, but it also implies a rather terrible isolation.⁶⁵ This provides us with the answer to the question raised by ll.17-18. While all mortal things are subject to the Sun, humankind has a superior faculty that enables us to resist or reject subjection. This "free will"⁶⁶ is therefore posited at the very start of the poem, yet it is simultaneously subtly subverted. In identifying himself with the stars, who we have seen are characterized by an inevitable subsuming into a greater power, he subverts human freewill at its very moment of assertion. The poem will go on to evince this weakness very graphically in the chariot of Life's prisoners.

* * *

The physical scene-setting that occurs in ll.25-28 has been well-established. The speaker is lying beneath a tree on a hill in the Appenines (probably above Casa Magni, where Shelley was writing this poem). The hill faces west out to the sea; at this moment of dawn the sun is rising behind him over the

⁶⁴ Notably ll.390 and 413-415.

⁶⁵ Bloom, p.225 and Reiman, p.24.

⁶⁶ Milne, p.685.

Appenines, and he is watching the night retreating into the west. Note that night "flees": the predatory connotations of the rising sun are therefore suggested. The speaker reports that "the Deep" is at his feet, meaning that the sea is below him off the coast. The phrase obviously also holds a more profound significance: the Deep, with its implications of a frightening abyss, is one option open to him, and Heaven above, with its positive, idealistic implications, is another. Two paths or possibilities seem to be offered. Merle Rubin comments how "night and day, the sky and the deep, converge upon him as though he were the centre of the universe, which indeed he is, for upon his decision everything will depend".⁶⁷ The speaker can make no choice, though, because at this moment his vision intervenes. Perhaps the answer to his choice lies in that vision. If so, it is a very negative answer. It would suggest that Heaven is too distant a prospect, and the Deep too inevitable.

Charles E. Robinson notes that ll.26-28 are an inversion of an extract from Goethe's Faust.⁶⁸ At lines 1087-8, Faust says:

The day ahead of me, night left behind,
The waves below, and overhead the sky...⁶⁹

The echo is ominous: Faust also faced a choice, and his decision led to his destruction. But why the inversion in Shelley, in which night lies ahead and day behind? The casting of day as the pursuing, dominating force and night as the weaker force fits

⁶⁷ Rubin, p. 362.

⁶⁸ Robinson, p.221 ff.

⁶⁹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Faust, trans. Walter Arndt (New York: Norton, 1976), p.27.

Shelley's symbolic purpose, as we have seen. The speaker, in aligning himself with the weaker night, is, like Faust, exerting a free will under the influence of the far stronger Mephistopheles. Again, the future of the poem seems to be pointing to pessimism.

The dream-vision structure has by now become apparent to the reader, and certain literary influences - notably Petrarch and Dante - seem likely. The description of the vision's arrival, in which the scene before the speaker is not lost, but subtly transformed as if covered with a veil of light, is significant. It means that the whole ensuing vision occurs on the present physical site, but is, as it were, at one remove from 'reality'. To return to the 'layers of dream' motif, we may say that this vision is projected over the speaker's perception to show another level of experience, as the veil that covers the physical scene shows another level of vision. One can use the usually antithetical words 'dream' and 'reality' almost interchangeably in this poem: reality is one level of dream in "this valley of perpetual dream" (l.397). 'Vision' is perhaps a better label, indicating how existence is very much a matter of perception.

The last two stanzas in this section describe a much-debated phenomenon. The speaker seems to be describing a déjà vu experience: "I knew / That I had felt the freshness of that dawn." It is as though he is reliving the experience. This raises the question of the speaker's relationship with Rousseau. It becomes evident later in the poem that Rousseau witnessed the arrival of the chariot in much the same way as the speaker of the poem does here. Firstly, in both cases a scene of desert-like wilderness is superimposed over a prior scene of idyllic natural beauty. The magnificence of the speaker's sunrise

over the Appenines is filmed over, as we have seen, with "a public way, / Thick strewn with summer dust" (l.43-44). For Rousseau, the glorious scene into which he awakes (which is also highly reminiscent of the speaker's position - on a mountain during sunrise) is also filmed over with a harsher landscape. It is as though the Labradorean desert which Rousseau uses as a metaphor (l.407) has become actuality: he begins to speak of "the wilderness" (ll.426, 443) and "the desart" (l.449). The beautiful landscape is still believed by both men to be present (ll.67-72; 447-449, 461), though the clear perception of it has become problematic. Secondly, the indecisive multitude is also seen by both men (ll.44-53; 445-457), and both men use similar images to describe the scenes - worms (ll.57; 504), gnats in the evening light (ll.46; 508-9), dead leaves in autumn (ll.51; 528-9). Both describe similar events in their own ways: Rousseau's phantoms that issue from the people of the multitude and turn to plague their creators are described by the speaker as shadows (as indeed Rousseau's are at l.488). These shadows cause the multitude's indecisive fear (ll.54-65), and are essentially products of the people's own minds. Both men speak of the loss of beauty and strength in the people - the speaker describes the young as clouds that meet in sexual love, whose lightnings extinguish themselves into rain. Similarly, Rousseau describes how "youthful glow" is "extinguished" and "melted" into tears of rain.

There are many other similarities, but these suffice to indicate that Rousseau's past experience is essentially the same one that the speaker is now undergoing. G. M. Matthews appears to be the first to have noticed this, and his thesis concerning Shelley's metaphysics corresponds very much to my own. The "two parallel accounts of the same experience"

indicate how reality is "coextensive with divinity, each of its manifestations suggesting, concealing, and being informed by a 'realer' aspect of reality underneath. Ultimate reality is opaque."⁷⁰ Matthews goes on to say that the shared experience of the speaker and Rousseau is the experience of their birth and awareness of life: the speaker is vicariously shown Rousseau's disillusionment so as to guide the former when he himself must make the choice that Rousseau made so mistakenly. Unfortunately, Matthews follows this with some dubious comments that tend to diminish his earlier perspicacity, the most notorious of which is his claim that Rousseau 'fudges' the encounter with the Shape all light by not drinking from the cup of Nepenthe.

Reiman sees Rousseau as a projection of the speaker's imagination, and so explains the similarity between the two characters' experiences. This becomes problematic though; it means that the speaker already knows the answers to his own questions, and the story of Rousseau's life. I prefer to see Rousseau as a separate character in the poem. Both he and the speaker can be seen as parts of their creator Shelley, facets of his consciousness. It is for this reason that I prefer to call the 'I' of the poem 'the speaker': to call him Shelley is to falsely limit Shelley himself. It is probably an appropriate place to add that I believe we must read the characters of the poem as sincere and genuine in their speeches. Some later commentators incline to reading Rousseau in particular in a completely ironic manner.⁷¹ While there may be contradictions and ironies in his narration, I do not believe that we can utterly discredit him or his narration on account of them.

⁷⁰ Matthews, p.106.

⁷¹ See Cronin, Hall, Duffy.

What all this discussion on the relationship between the speaker and Rousseau finally points to is, I think, this. Rousseau's vision led him to make a decision, albeit seemingly the wrong one, of plunging into Life. What is surely evident, therefore, is that the speaker, too, must make a decision. Many early commentators on this poem (and, indeed, some later ones) have seen the speaker as the detached spectator of many dream visions. Pulos centres his reading of "The Triumph of Life" on this aspect, stating that Shelley reconciles his empiricism and his idealism dramatically in this poem by being a distanced spectator. Carlos Baker identifies this objectivity as being one of the major differences between this poem and Shelley's other work, and King-Hele agrees.⁷² Merle Rubin's later and perceptive commentary takes this basic thesis and develops it more fully: Shelley has "a detachment beyond despair", and in this poem can stand back from Rousseau and the spectacle of Life and critically understand. She then speculates on the possibility that the poem may have gone on to show a way in which to act in Life, and in doing so, I believe she begins to subvert her own argument of detachment. What seems obvious to me is that the speaker of the poem is vitally and centrally involved in its action. He is firstly confronted with the chariot of Life; then Rousseau tells him his own story of choice. The poem ends abruptly at a point at which the speaker would seem to be approaching decision-time. Throughout the poem we are regularly told his reactions to what he is seeing, and several times Rousseau prompts the speaker into thinking about his potential response to the spectacle. Behind the whole panorama of this poem is the question: what is the speaker going to do about this? It is this question

⁷² Pulos, p.89; Baker, p.257; King-Hele, p.349.

that I believe is central to Shelley's intention in this poem. Given the world of the poem - a world of layered reality/dream, of ambiguity and the impossibility of absolute knowledge, and, most terrifyingly, a world in which Life is seen as a vastly stronger, impelling force over human will - how does an individual react? Shelley's acute sense of social responsibility insisted upon an answer to this question, and it is this answer that he attempts to work out in the poem. It is my belief that the overwhelming bleakness of that answer finally caused the poem to end as abruptly and unresolvedly as it did.

We have taken quite some time to examine the first forty lines of the poem because these lines have opened up the main areas for discussion, as outlined above. Let us now move into a closer examination of the remainder of the poem.

III (ll.41-180)

Lines 41-42 underline the idea of reality as a dream. The speaker's "trance" is described as a "waking dream": later, Rousseau calls the waking dream "Life" (l.180), and so again blurs the boundaries between conscious life and dream.

The scene before the speaker is one of aridity and turmoil. He sees a public way and a multitude of people in frantic but futile motion. Purpose has somehow been lost as all hasten onwards without knowing whence, whither or why. More tragically, none know how they became part of this endless motion. The speaker compares them to autumn leaves on summer's bier, and the simile is again ominous: autumn leaves fall in this deathly motion by a law of nature, and the implication that human beings are likewise impelled by a force of necessity is inescapable. This is particularly reinforced by the reference to the cycles of humanity that follows immediately (l.52). All are submerged into this torrent of humanity (another image that Rousseau uses later in his own description at ll.458-459). Why? The speaker goes on to list the actions of various of the people, and each action shows an individual being harassed by an ephemeral fear of his or her own making. Indeed, the descriptions indicate a terrible circularity, as people are shown to be caught in self-created obsessions. Some fly from "the thing they feared", while others conversely seek that "thing" (l.54-55). Others are haunted by their own shadows, which they

call death, and from which some attempt to flee. Still others observe different obsessions: pursuing, or fleeing from, shadows cast by clouds or birds lost in the sky, or else staring at "trodden worms" on the ground. It is interesting to note in these latter cases the insubstantial nature of the sources of the shadows - clouds and birds that cannot be seen. The worms are the only things of substance, and that substance is downtrodden and demeaning - hardly a focus for living.

Indeed, the whole scene paints a picture of humanity living a life-in-death, totally absorbed into futile, solipsistic obsessions. The speaker's awareness of this is reflected in his language: "summer's bier" (l.51), "steps toward the tomb" (l.56), "death" (l.59), "ghosts" (l. 60).⁷³ This is all very tragic to the speaker, because he can still sense the flowers, the fountains, the lawns and caverns that he believes exist in the 'reality' behind this vision. The multitude shows obsessive desire and need, either to escape or to achieve; the speaker sees that this "thirst" could be quenched if the people could only sense and believe the existence of this deeper level of reality.

There are some interesting points to note here. In describing this scene of beauty, the speaker tells of "violet banks where sweet dreams brood" (l.72). Ironically, these violet banks are producing far-

⁷³ Note that this death-in-life is evident before the Chariot of Life arrives. This seems to suggest that these people are already victims of Life's corruption. As such, it would support the deeper implication that the speaker, too, is already part of Life, and one of its victims, as was suggested by the déjà vu reference. Yet the speaker's implied corruption does not prevent him seeing more widely than the others in the scene: he can still sense some good around him. It is his not-yet-lost ability to exert his flawed human will that Shelley is concerned with.

from-sweet dreams for the speaker. Indeed, one has suspicions about the unalloyed beauty of the natural panorama the speaker proclaims. In the same way, the opening description of sunrise in lines 1-40 is almost unbelievably idyllic; the speaker's sensations just prior to the unfolding of his vision are nothing short of rapturous. "The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold / Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air" (ll.38-39). This is the Shelley of Prometheus Unbound, but in the context of "The Triumph of Life", this kind of rapture seems unreal. Rather, as Cronin says, what holds our attention as being graphically recognisable is the dusty road and the streams of people.⁷⁴ Again, our distinction between reality and dream becomes confused. Certainly, the idyllic nature is never present for very long in this poem, and always seems to slip out of humanity's grasp. In the speaker's account here, his description is related via senses other than his sight: he feels the breeze and hears the fountains (ll.67, 69). While this is Shelley's sensual imagery at work again, it also emphasises how this natural idyll is fragile in the extreme: apprehension of it relies on faulty senses, of which the commonest, sight, has become ambiguous.

Into this scene of mayhem comes the chariot. Its potency is indicated long before it actually arrives, in its effect on the multitude. The throng's actions are exacerbated under the influence of the approaching "car", just as a south wind shakes the wood at the end of the day. The phrase used in this latter simile is actually "the extinguished day" (l.76) - this section contains several metaphoric references to sunset and the close of day.⁷⁵ This is a subtle irony: the daybreak that the speaker is witnessing is spiritually

⁷⁴ Cronin, p.210.

⁷⁵ See Milne, p.686.

the death of day, because the sun that is rising is about to be consumed by a greater 'sun', the chariot of Life, which is actually Death (or at least, Death-in-Life). This complex inversion of values and concepts illustrates Shelley's attitude to this life. The comparison that follows is crucial to understanding the poem, and has occasioned much debate.

And a cold glare, intenser than the noon
But icy cold, obscured with [] light
The Sun as he the stars.

(ll.77-79)⁷⁶

What we have here is a hierarchy of lights. The weaker stars are subsumed by the Sun, which in turn is subsumed by the greater light of the chariot. The action is the same in each: a weaker light is inexorably consumed by a more powerful light. We have seen this ominous image already in the opening lines of the poem: its correlation to the movement here can only bode ill, particularly when the light it brings is a cold, icy glare. Whatever the ambiguities of the Sun's role in the first lines of the poem, it did bring warm, creative light. The light of the chariot is, by contrast, evil, in that it can only bring "tempest" (ll.82-87).

The speaker compares the chariot's coming to the young moon bearing a shadowy outline of the old 'mother' moon in its curve. While this ostensibly describes the physical appearance of the chariot with the shadowy "Shape" within it, the association with the moon is interesting. Most critics are in general

⁷⁶ According to Reiman, the absent word was speculatively filled by Mary Shelley with "blinding". (Footnote to "The Triumph of Life", Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.457.)

agreement that the moon is here a negative image. Reiman associates the moon in Shelley's poetry with reason or cold, analytical rationality, but Yeats' less rigid description is better. He simply says that Shelley "grows unfriendly" when he speaks of the moon.⁷⁷ Certainly the lunar image takes on negative connotations here when associated with the chariot of Life. The fact that the correlation is only used once more in the poem, again to describe the chariot (l.455), is further indicative of its negative standing in the poem.

It is appropriate at this stage to interpolate as brief a discussion as possible on the literary antecedents to "The Triumph of Life", because both the dream-vision and the motif of the triumph are found in prominent earlier sources that obviously influenced Shelley.

The most apparent literary antecedent for the poem is Petrarch's Trionfi, or Triumphs, a series of six poems in which one state is overcome by another, greater state (love is defeated by chastity, chastity by death, death by fame, fame by time, but time is finally defeated by eternity). The metrical form used is terza rima, and the basic image of a chariot leading its prisoners in triumph, surrounded by a throng of people, is Petrarch's structural premise.

The similarities with Shelley's poem are many and are obviously intended to be recognised.⁷⁸ Shelley

⁷⁷ See Reiman, p.14 and Yeats, p.92.

⁷⁸ The similarity has produced much speculation as to how Shelley intended to continue the poem. Was this intended to be a longer epic work (which Shelley always wanted to write and of which we have only the first book), or was this a seventh and final book to 'finish' Petrarch's series? I think these speculations become unprofitable after a while, taking focus away from what the poem does say, to what it might have said (which, of course, could have been anything).

uses both the metrical form of terza rima, and the general structuring image of the chariot surrounded by prisoners and subservient onlookers. As in Petrarch, the scene is usually sad and the chariot's effect is demeaning to the humans involved. In both poems, the speaker is a naive and questioning spectator and so an unrecognisable guide is provided. (Petrarch writes: "Toward me there came a spirit... / ...calling me by name... / Wondering I said to him: 'How knowest thou / My face? for thee I cannot recognize' / And he: 'The heavy bonds that weigh me down / Prevent thee.'"⁷⁹ "His words and the noble manner of his speech / Revealed to me what his changed looks had hidden. / So we took seat in a high and open place."⁸⁰ Compare this with Rousseau's introduction.)

There are even more specific echoes in Shelley: his Shape in the chariot recalls the shape of Death in the triumph of Death - "a woman shrouded in a dress of black".⁸¹ In the same book, the speaker laments how the great men are fallen: "Popes, emperors and others who had ruled, / Where now their gems and sceptres and their crowns, / Their mitres, and the purple they had worn?"⁸² The guide spends much time pointing out great men amongst the multitude. And there is a distinct, deliberate (though crucially different) echo at the end of Shelley's fragment, from the first lines of the final book, which read:

When I had seen that nothing under heaven
Is firm and stable, in dismay I turned

⁷⁹ The Triumphs of Petrarch, trans. Ernest Hatch Wilkins (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp.6-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 54.

⁸² Ibid, p.56.

To my heart and asked: 'Wherein hast thou
thy trust?'⁸³

While Petrarch goes on to extol religious faith, Shelley the atheist and sceptic does not. His question, "What is Life?", though phrased differently, emphasises the same problem - the instability, relativity and unknowable nature of 'reality' and existence. Shelley cannot seek refuge in a God; he would like to seek refuge in a postponed neo-Platonic reality but this is increasingly questioned by him. Nevertheless, his question must be asked, because one's answer to it dictates how one lives now, in this life. While Petrarch could answer with an affirmative, confident faith, Shelley in all honesty can only falter and stop.

A second and earlier major literary antecedent is Dante's Commedia, particularly the Purgatorio. The immediate similarities are in the use of terza rima, and in the relationship between speaker and guide. Dante is guided by the pagan, but deeply respected, Virgil. When Virgil leaves Dante in Canto XXX, the latter laments "But Virgil - O he had left us, and we stood / Orphaned of him; Virgil, dear father, most / Kind Virgil I gave me to for my soul's good".⁸⁴ Despite Sayers' rather clumsy final line, the mentor-like quality that Virgil has for Dante is evident, and suggests Shelley's respect for his 'mentor' figure in this poem, Rousseau. While Shelley's earlier youthful enthusiasm for Rousseau had been somewhat tempered by this time, it is nevertheless acknowledged here.

There are more specific echoes from Dante in Shelley's "The Triumph of Life", notably in the use

⁸³ Ibid, p.107.

⁸⁴ Dante, The Divine Comedy: Purgatory, Canto XXX, ll.49-51, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (1955; rpt. U.K.: Penguin, 1959), p.308.

of the chariot and the Shape all light. As Bloom has shown in some detail,⁸⁵ Shelley's chariot is sourced in the biblical chariots of Ezekiel and Revelation, and their later counterparts in Dante and Milton.⁸⁶ Dante's chariot of the Sacrament appears in Canto XXIX of the Purgatorio and is parodied in Canto XXXII by the chariot of the Church. The first chariot is a beautiful, positive one - "And lo! A flood of brilliance suddenly / Through the great forest spread on every side"⁸⁷ - and Shelley ironically uses such descriptions in his own poem. Dante's chariot is compared to the moon, is pursued by "a company... / Following as though led on", and is encircled by pennants of rainbow-like colour.⁸⁸ Shelley uses all these descriptions, but in a parodic way. Dante's followers are saints clad in white; Shelley's are miserable prisoners. Dante's chariot is accompanied by "a most dulcet melody";⁸⁹ Shelley's by "savage music" (l.142). Shelley's chariot is obviously closer in spirit to Dante's chariot of the Church, which is a ghastly parody of the earlier car. It carries a "harlot, loosely dressed",⁹⁰ presumably representing the corrupted Roman Catholic Church of the middle ages. Shelley appears to have conflated Dante's two chariots to achieve the cruel, harsh beauty of the chariot of Life.

The Shape all light also has analogues in Dante,

⁸⁵ Bloom, pp.238 ff.

⁸⁶ Dante himself acknowledges his source at l. 100 of Purgatorio, Canto XXIX. (Hereafter referred to as Dante.)

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.298, ll.16-17.

⁸⁸ Ibid, ll.52-54, 64-65 and 73-78 respectively.

⁸⁹ Ibid, l.22.

⁹⁰ Dante, Canto XXXII, l.149.

who in Canto XXVIII comes upon "a rivulet /...its ripples small / Bending the grasses on the edge of it" (ll.25-27). (Shelley uses exactly this description.) Here Dante sees a beautiful lady walking, and is thrown into confusion by the sight. He asks her to explain his surroundings and she replies that she will "content" all his questions. This lady is Dante's Matilda, and the situation is almost exactly analogous to Rousseau's waking in the valley of dreams and meeting the Shape all light. It is interesting that Dante's confusion arises from the juxtaposition of this sudden beauty with his previous experiences of terror and mortality. If this can be compared to Rousseau, his previous experience (of which he remembers nothing, but about which he speculates) was similarly fraught. We will examine these ideas (and the problems they raise) later when considering Rousseau's dream. Suffice it here to note the obvious antecedents and the possible interpretive echoes Dante supplies for Shelley's poem.

There are many other literary sources for specific motifs in "The Triumph of Life". Rousseau's La Nouvelle Heloise has been examined at length by Reiman for its obvious echoes in Rousseau's dream. Reiman also points to Milton, particularly his poem Comus, as a source for the Shape all light and her cup. I find this a little tenuous; while Comus's cup of Metamorphosis (he is the son of Circe) is in the tradition of the poisoned cup which Shelley uses, I find a more helpful echo from this poem in the water-goddess Sabrina, whose description is highly reminiscent of the Shape all light. She sets her "printless feet" on water and flowers, an image that Shelley uses at ll.361-364, and her "precious vial'd

"liquors" heal the charmed virgin.⁹¹ What we may have is another conflation, that of the beautiful female figure and the evil cup, of Sabrina and Comus.

Another Miltonic analogue is in the figure of Death, Satan's son, who guards the gates of Hell in Paradise Lost. He is described in Book II: 666-669 as "the other shape / If shape it might be called that shape had none / ...or substance might be called that shadow seemed." It would appear from ll.87-95 of "The Triumph of Life" that this description was in Shelley's mind as he wrote. Recognising this association helps us to perceive that the Shape of Life in the chariot is in reality Death, if Shelley's language has not already made this plain.

There are, of course, other specific literary echoes. Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" is suggested in Rousseau's dream; Lucretius' 'simulacra' are used in Rousseau's account of the phantoms that fly off the people of the multitude. Mary Wollstonecraft's vision of "the sons and daughters of men pursuing shadows" seems to have influenced Shelley.⁹² There is a Platonic influence in the poem, and even Spenser has been suggested as a possible source. Indeed, an entire thesis could be written on this subject alone, as Shelley has apparently set out to 'rewrite' several of these major sources for western literature. All that needs to be indicated here, however, is the way these sources influence interpretation of the poem. Bloom, for example, uses the biblical meaning of the chariot (propelled by, and conveying, a powerful divine being) to show that Shelley intended a diabolic

⁹¹ Comus, ll.897 and 847 respectively. Milton's Dramatic Poems, ed. G. & M. Bullough (1958; rpt. London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1963).

⁹² Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Woman (U.K.: Penguin, 1982), p.213.

parody, in which the chariot of Life is really Life-in Death, a meaningless, blind, but overwhelmingly powerful force. It is "a terrifying irony of contrasts."⁹³ Certainly the Shape is meant to indicate a death-like state - crouching as it does in "the shadow of a tomb", wearing a "cloud like crape" (l.90) about its head (or where the head should be), and generally surrounded by "dun" gloom. The charioteer is a "Janus-visaged" Shadow, but those multiple faces are useless because all four pairs of eyes are banded. As A. C. Bradley notes, the charioteer is not blind - he could see if he wanted to - but his eyes are concealed.⁹⁴ This, of course, contrasts with the biblical chariots, which are covered with myriad eyes, emphasising the all-seeing nature of God. Shelley, rather, stresses the dangerous and futile blindness of this chariot:

...little profit brings
 Speed in the van and blindness in the
 rear,
 Nor then avail the beams that quench
 the Sun
 Or that these banded eyes could pierce
 the sphere
 Of all that is, has been, or will be done.

(ll.100-104)

The last line indicates the power of the charioteer of Life to see the sweep of history. But Shelley's point is that it is a condition of life to be entrapped within one's own limited perception (as are the multitude at the start of this section). To be alive is to be blind to final truths, to

⁹³ Bloom, p.242.

⁹⁴ Bradley, p.443.

absolutes.

At this point in the poem, having witnessed the solipsistic tragedy of the individuals in the multitude, and the dangerous blindness of the chariot's power, the speaker is aroused to respond. "...and I rose aghast, / Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance" (ll.107-108). Once again, the dream becomes reality to the speaker (and the reader!), and he attempts to set some order into his existence by reminding himself that this is all 'just a dream'.

The speaker here introduces the central metaphor of the triumph: he recognises the scene before him as a military triumph, in which the conquering army traditionally entered the conquered city - usually Rome - marching the Roman prisoners behind the chariot of the victorious general, while the citizens of the city came out to meet the procession. The metaphor is appropriate in that the multitude's rejoicing at the arrival of the chariot is very superficial; in actuality they are coming out to acknowledge their oppressor and to admit their own imprisonment. This explains the negative adjectives in "fierce song" and "maniac dance" (l.110). There is also a retributory aspect to the triumph: the oppressors must now in turn accept oppression (ll.115-116). Moreover, all aspects of civil life are included in this triumph; the rulers ("senatehouse"), the ruled ("prison"), and the artists or pleasure-seekers ("theatre" - l.114).

In ll.120-127, the gathering of captives is briefly discussed. The speaker divides it into two groups, the oppressed and the oppressors, and then describes the latter group. They have subdued their era either by "action" (military force) or by "suffering" (political restriction), and their rule was evil to the end, so that any benefits ("fruit and flower" - l.124) were outweighed by that rule ("the trunk"). The speaker refers to a "great winter" which

will eventually annul the name and fame of such oppressors: the implication is that this "winter" is the final destruction of Life, which is, of course, death. Certainly death puts an end to the little worlds such people erect; it lays "their own earth with them forever low" (l.127) - and we can gloss "earth" here as meaning both those egocentric worlds and the simpler reading of the physical body.

Contrasted to these are the much-discussed "sacred few" who are not present at this triumph because they would not submit to the Conqueror. These are also divided into two groups: those who "touched the world with living flame / [Then] Fled back like eagles to their native noon" (ll.130-131), and those who remained in life, eschewing the corrupting, imprisoning lures of power and wealth. Of the former group, Reiman writes: "The eagle was a favourite symbol of spiritual vision and aspiration...because traditionally it was able to renew its keen vision by flying into the sun (symbolic of the Ideal), which burned the scales from its eyes" (p.39). He goes on to say that the eagle then plunged back into the fountain of mortal life, whereas the "sacred few" did not, and so cut themselves off from humanity. I believe (as do most other commentators) that the speaker is simply referring to those young, uncorrupted geniuses who died in youth (the Keatses and Chattertons of the world). Reiman's allegorical explanations are interesting, though, in that they explain the metaphor that the speaker uses. These are souls who could not survive the deathly light of Life, and so fled back to their true spiritual home, presumably an existence outside life. This is cited by the neo-Platonic readers of the poem as evidence of Shelley's Platonic intent in "The Triumph of Life", and certainly it indicates that the ideal world was still an issue for Shelley. I think, though, that the

very brevity of this description, and the absence of further reference to it, becomes a telling indication of Shelley's growing doubt of ever knowing that ideal.⁹⁵

Most commentators read "they of Athens and Jerusalem" (l.134) as referring to figures like Socrates and Jesus, the greatest representatives of the Hellenic and Hebraic traditions.⁹⁶ Again, the very paucity of further names in this group indicates the enormous difficulties in refusing to give in to Life, with her cunning traps of power and wealth.

The speaker now returns, almost mesmerised, to the maddened crowd that surrounds the triumph. 'Maddened' is the operative word here: in all descriptions of the multitude, the speaker uses language describing lunacy (which focusses us again on the moon-like associations with the chariot). The million are "raging around" with "maniac dance" (ll.110-111); they are "wild" (and this word recurs constantly in the speaker's vocabulary - see ll.75, 138, 142, 149 etc.); they are "ribald..., tempestuous..., fierce" (ll.136, 141, 145). From line 137 on an interesting tense change occurs; the speaker moves from past tense to present. "The wild dance maddens...and those / Who lead it... / Outspeed the

⁹⁵ I should here make a distinction between the neo-platonist readings of the poem, and the school that I support. While the neo-platonists agree that the ideal can only finally be known outside this life, they do not take into account what this means for the sceptical Shelley. If a thing can only be proposed as existing outside this consciousness or existence, how can we be sure that it does exist? This is the dilemma for Shelley. Finally, Pulos would say, Shelley can only look to his faith in such an ideal, but my point is that Shelley's faith is subjected to growing assaults of doubt as he questions the validity of these postulations beyond present consciousness.

⁹⁶ See the footnote on p.459 of Shelley's Poetry and Prose.

chariot...". This present tense continues to line 175, and seems to show the speaker totally reliving the experience, speaking as if it is happening again. The multitude seems to have this effect of rivetting his attention. Further, it indicates once more how the dream and reality have fused in the speaker's mind; as he tells the dream to us, recalling it in the past tense, it becomes so real to him that he relives it in the present tense. Past dream has become present reality.

In what has become a habit with the speaker, he now divides the multitude into two groups⁹⁷ - the young and the old. Both are "tortured by... agonizing pleasure" (l.143), the desire and need that the speaker observed when he first saw the crowd. This is Life's fundamental emotion - desire. People lust for power, for wealth, for sexual pleasure, for safety, for knowledge. Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly his theory on the development of the self, also posits desire as central to human life. Alan Sinfield, writing on this subject, says that "the point at which the infant moves into language and identity is constitutive also of desire for another person... Desire exists as an effect of a primordial absence."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ This raises an interesting psychological point. Does the speaker see everything in terms of dualities, of oppositions? One is reminded of his physical position at the start of the poem, and the choice that he must make concerning Life.

⁹⁸ Alan Sinfield, Alfred Tennyson, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). For Lacan, the entry into consciousness is marked by the infant's sense of loss, which may be expressed as the realisation that there are objects separate from it (notably the mother). Hence the sense of a separate, isolated self emerges simultaneously with the desire to regain a unity with the now absent object. As such, desire becomes a hallmark of consciousness. I believe that Shelley perceives the central role of desire in human personality, and explores its corrupting ability in "The Triumph of Life".

This seems to be the situation in "The Triumph of Life", as narrated by the speaker. The young outspeed the chariot, dancing a savage Bacchanal under the influence of Life, whose "unholy leisure" is "soothed by mischief" (ll.145-146). The Bacchanalian reference is apposite in that these youths and maidens behave very much like maddened Bacchants, with loosened hair, wild dances and free sexual activity. The speaker uses an evocative series of images to describe the outcome of this lust for Life. The young couples are like heavenly bodies that enter each other's atmosphere and kindle explosions; they are moths attracted to, and finally burnt by, light; they are two clouds impelled to meet and exchange lightnings in a valley, ultimately dying in rain. In each image there is a compulsion that forces the suicidal action and that overrides any will: the attraction of forces (gravity?) compels the planets together; an imposed instinct makes moths fly into light; and the external forces of wind and weather impell the clouds to clash. Similarly, Life is the force that compels the lusts of the multitude. When two individuals come together, they "kindle invisibly"; the "fiery band" of lust that holds the union eventually "snaps" and the couple parts, falls and each is destroyed. The sexual act, with climax as a 'death', becomes a paradigm of existence itself, characterised by constant desire and inevitably ending when desire ends.⁹⁹ Life consumes the fallen bodies by riding over them, and the speaker is horrified to find that no further trace of individuality remains after this destruction: all that is visible is a transitory excrescence like foam thrown

⁹⁹ This point is the logical conclusion of the Lacanian theory. The moment one ceases to desire, to see oneself as separate from an absent object, consciousness ceases. Therefore, the moment differentiation ceases and one achieves total unity of self and object, the self dies.

up on the beach by the tide.

Nor does old age escape Life's murderous intentions. Indeed, these people are demeaned even further by Life.

- Behind,

Old men, and women foully disarrayed
Shake their grey hair in the insulting
wind,
Limp in the dance and strain with limbs
decayed...

(ll.164-167)

In attempting to keep up with the Bacchanal, they only betray their own impotence: the wind 'insults' them by revealing their grey-haired corruption. The wind is, of course, the malevolent tool of Life (see ll.144-145). The chariot, however, leaves them behind, moving on swiftly so that the elderly dancers are left in deeper and deeper shade. The shadows mentioned by the speaker at the start, and by Rousseau later, are once more described here, flitting around the old dancers mockingly. Nevertheless, this second group also "fulfil / Their work" (ll.172-173), which is to sink back into the dust and die, leaving their bodies to corruption. Like the young, they enact their instinctive roles. In a bitterly terse final comment, the speaker says that "frost" or old age finishes in these what the "fire" of youth completes in the young - both groups are corrupted and destroyed. The terrible inevitability of this is now evident to the speaker; this is the human destiny. That existence has been reduced to such a debased, mechanical and pathetic farce is too much for him to cope with. He is "struck to the heart by this sad pageantry" and must ask: "'And what is this? / Whose shape is that within the car? and why'- / I would have

added- 'is all here amiss?'" (l.l.176-179). It is interesting to note that while these questions are obviously spoken aloud, the speaker adds that they are also said "half to myself" (l.177). The implications of these questions are crucial challenges to any individual confronted with Life - and the speaker realises that that includes himself.

The answer that is given to the speaker's questions is brief but comprehensive. "But a voice answered.. 'Life'..." (l.180). Some critics¹⁰⁰ have said that this response only answers the first two questions and not the third, and that Rousseau is ignorant of the reasons for this state of existence. It seems obvious to me, though, that Rousseau's reply answers all three questions. What the speaker is witnessing is life or existence; the shape in the chariot is Life, the force personified; the reason that all is amiss has to do with the nature of that force called Life. That the speaker has not yet enunciated the final question is a delaying device. This is the nub of the matter and is at the heart of the poem; it is the question that the speaker will have to confront at the end of the poem.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Notably Reiman: "which question is Rousseau answering, the first... or the second? ...note that the Poet has not yet actually asked his third and most important question, 'Why?'" (p.40).

¹⁰¹ That Rousseau seems to know this question despite the fact that it has not been spoken, indicates his ability to know what is in the speaker's mind (see also l.190). This is probably because he has already been through what the speaker is now experiencing.

IV (11.180-308)

Rousseau's appearance in the poem is unexpected on several levels. Certainly it takes the speaker by surprise, as he perceives that what he thought was an inanimate tree root is actually an animate soul. Secondly, it suddenly brings the entire pageant much closer to the speaker: he realises that he is confronted by "one of that deluded crew" (l.184), the multitude that surrounds the chariot. This is, of course, far more immediately challenging - and indeed, the figure before him issues an ultimatum to the speaker in his very first words. Obviously this dream is not one in which he can remain detached and uninvolved. At every step of the way his implicit inclusion is insisted upon.

Rousseau is described (in lines 182-188) in terms of natural phenomena. His body is like an old, twisted root; his eyes are like holes in that root, and his hair is like long, white grasses covering the holes. In the light of Rousseau's central life-long occupation as the devoted follower of nature, this description is extremely appropriate.¹⁰² But it raises the question of why Rousseau is present in this poem as the guide-mentor figure. This is a third reason why his appearance is surprising. Furthermore, the degraded, distorted nature of his physical appearance seems to suggest that he has become corrupted, which further complicates his role as guide. His very first

¹⁰² See Bloom, p.255.

words to the speaker of the poem seem to indicate that his life is to be characterised by mistake. " 'If thou canst forbear / To join the dance, which I had well forborne,' / Said the grim Feature" (ll.188-190). The Miltonic phrase "grim Feature" - used to describe Death in Paradise Lost (Book X, l.279) - though ostensibly referring to the physical form of Rousseau,¹⁰³ nevertheless carries negative connotations for Rousseau's role as guide.

Recalling Dante's guide here is helpful. We have seen how Virgil is much loved and respected by Dante throughout his vision. Yet Virgil, because he is a pagan, cannot accompany Dante on the final stages of his journey into Paradise. Though he is wise and of vital importance as an influence, his life is centred on a false philosophy, and so he cannot succeed to the 'final' knowledge. The comparison with Rousseau becomes clearer now. Rousseau's devotion to nature at the eventual expense of humanity is a philosophy that Shelley finally rejects as mistaken.

The unexpectedness of Rousseau's entry into the poem has prompted a plethora of critical responses, particularly as to what Rousseau's 'mistake' was. Carlos Baker's comment that Rousseau's "great failure of nerve" in 'not drinking' from the cup of Nepenthe led to his absorption into Life has, I feel, been discredited.¹⁰⁴ Bloom's reading has been particularly influential: he sees Rousseau's nature worship as replacing the right focus of mankind on the light of the imagination. Others posit variations on this theme: Cameron and Hodgson point to Rousseau's desire for women's love (an extension of nature) as diverting

¹⁰³ See Shelley's Poetry and Prose, footnote p.460.

¹⁰⁴ But not before several eminent critics agreed with him - notably Matthews and King-Hele.

him from the right path.¹⁰⁵ Milne shows how Rousseau's refusal to give up individuality and be absorbed into ideal unity is his error.¹⁰⁶ Edward Duffy should also be mentioned here: he sees Rousseau as an ironic figure who is unable to see or admit his failing - which is that he refused to commune with the Shape all light.¹⁰⁷ (This argument becomes increasingly fragile as Duffy continues.) Reiman begins by interpreting Rousseau in the light of Shelley's interest in the power-will problem. Rousseau, he states, had the power to resist being absorbed into mundane, material life, but did not. Later, however, he says that Rousseau's problem was that he desired the eternal in the mortal world; he tried to "absolutize the relative".¹⁰⁸ Bloom concurs with this when he says that Rousseau plunged into mortal life in an effort to find the immortal. McGann transforms the second aspect of Reiman's argument, saying that Rousseau "denies any kinship with natural existence; and Life, accepting the denial, 'conquers' Rousseau".¹⁰⁹ This directly contradicts Bloom's reading. This is obviously another issue in "The Triumph of Life" that Shelley has left open to interpretation. Finally, though, almost all critics agree that Rousseau is a "cautionary exemplar".¹¹⁰ He is, as it were, a negative mentor (though several commentators like to add that he himself 'learns' throughout the poem, achieving an understanding of his position). We are, however, left with the original problem: why is

¹⁰⁵ Cameron, pp.461-462; Hodgson, pp.595-622.

¹⁰⁶ Milne, pp.700-701.

¹⁰⁷ Duffy, p.119-122.

¹⁰⁸ Reiman, pp.41-42 and 48-49.

¹⁰⁹ McGann, p.37.

¹¹⁰ Rubin, p.364.

Rousseau used in the poem? We can only employ the poem's own references to discover this. All we know is what Rousseau tells us; this raises the issue of whether or not he is a reliable narrator and guide. I believe, and have already stated as much, that we are meant to read the characters in the poem as sincere, though they may certainly be flawed. Rousseau tells us that he joined the dance of Life: we have seen that this means giving in to the desires and primal lusts that compel us all, whether for "blood and gold" (power by coercion, and wealth, l.287), or for more physical needs. Later (ll.200-207) he expands on this:

'I feared, lived, hated, suffered, did,
and died,
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
Stain that within which still disdains to
wear it.-
If I have been extinguished, yet there
rise
A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.'

Rousseau uses the same image that is used to describe the dancers in the previous scene. He, too, was subject to the desires that are evinced in the multitude at the very start of the speaker's vision. He fears, loves, hates and suffers, just as they did (ll.54-64). Like them, too, he had a "spark" of will and imagination - a strong spark in the sacred few who were able to touch the world with "living flame". But the compulsion that is our mortal nature, that is an

integral part of human existence, the "earth" in us all (l.127), Life's curse - this overwhelms Rousseau's spark and extinguishes it (l.206). The image recalls ll.150-157, where the young are compared to planets, moths and clouds who kindle an explosion by combining their sparks, and so cause a self-destruction. Rousseau, like the dancers around the chariot, is left to corruption.

There is a vital note of hope in his words, though - the first note of hope in the poem. Rousseau, though fallen and corrupted by Life, is yet able to perceive his position and to regret and despise it. "That within" still disdains to wear his corruption. The suggestion is that somehow there has survived a vestige of living will, and that therefore choice and action are still possible. We see this in Rousseau's decision to cease dancing after the chariot (ll.195-196). Moreover, he can perceive that his "spark", before it was extinguished, managed to light many "beacons" in the world: Rousseau's role as philosopher and artist has provided lights that can indicate a way for others (such as the speaker). Hence I would proffer an amelioration of the generally negative critical reaction to Rousseau. While he is certainly a "cautionary exemplar", one must not overlook his positive contributions. Rousseau is chosen to feature in this poem because, among other reasons, he was one whose spark was strong and gave a living flame of individual genius to the world. Yet even he was overwhelmed by Life. This latter aspect does not, however, invalidate the former; Rousseau's beacons are still alright. But the entire story simply underlines the might of Life's compelling power: even Rousseau is overcome. Hence his earlier wish to hide his debased eyesockets - he knows his perception has been fouled by Life and that he has a limited and

disillusioned outlook.¹¹¹

The speaker's response to Rousseau has already been briefly suggested in his surprise and immediate sense of involvement. I think that this is subtly stressed in lines 187-199. Rousseau's first speech to him issues the challenge to either join the dance, or else resist and hear Rousseau's narrative. "'If thou canst forbear / To join the dance, which I had well forborne,' / Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware" (ll.188-190). The phrase which I have underlined is highly suggestive. What is the speaker's thought, of which Rousseau is aware? Does it concern Rousseau's distorted appearance, which has occupied the speaker's words up to this point? This would imply that Rousseau is blaming the dance of Life for his appearance, and so is an entirely plausible explanation. But equally plausible is the possibility that the speaker realises that he is implicitly involved in this pageant, and that he must make a choice. If this is so, Rousseau's awareness is that the speaker is deciding how to act when confronted with the dance of Life, and so he warns the speaker against succumbing to its transient and destructive pleasures.

What is even more interesting is the speaker's reaction to Rousseau's ultimatum. "...ere he could resume, I cried, / 'First who art thou?'" (ll.198-199). This sounds suspiciously like a delaying tactic, putting off the evil moment. This may seem a little too cynical an explanation, particularly if one remembers that at this stage, the speaker does not

¹¹¹ Bloom's assertion that Rousseau is blind (Bloom, p.255) has been contested successfully by Reiman, who points out (Reiman, p.39) that Rousseau sees at several points in the poem (such as ll.234-238, 252 and especially 544-546). Whatever the degree of Rousseau's vision, the point is that it is debased and corrupted.

know who it is that is delivering this ultimatum and advice. Indeed, the horror and fear that the pageant has aroused in him would undoubtedly make him suspicious and desirous of more information.

Nevertheless, Rousseau makes it quite clear that the information he will give to the speaker only delays action. "'If thirst of knowledge doth not thus abate, / Follow it even to the night, but I / Am weary'" (ll.194-196). The speaker will still be faced with a decision after Rousseau has delivered his guidance. A continuing "thirst for knowledge" may then become desire, and as such, a lure with which Life may ensnare humanity.

What follows this challenging introduction of Rousseau is a description of the captives chained behind the chariot. Rousseau calls them "'The Wise, / The great, the unforgotten.'" (l.208-209), and continues by outlining the spheres of power that these individuals moved in. The captives, as holders of power in life, are distinct from the multitude, who were the impotent victims of power during life. As has been previously mentioned, the opening lines are an almost direct translation from Petrarch, and indicate the leaders of church, government, monarchy and learning. The inclusion of the last category is particularly damning: even the philosophers and sages of the day are victims of Life's lusts, and in their desire for power they impose their thoughts on others.¹¹²

Rousseau concludes that none of these individuals acquired, or even desired, self-knowledge: the realisation of their own limitations as mortals subject to faulty senses, and bereft of any absolute truth. Such knowledge chastens humanity and gives confident power a hollowness. By their denying such

¹¹² 'Schools of thought'?

self-knowledge their might is finally rendered useless: "the mutiny within" defeats them.¹¹³ Mortal desire, the stamp of humanity, finally defeats the spark of will and imagination, and eventually the powerful become victims of their own lust for power. They "feigned" their possession of absolute truth and authority ("the morn of truth" - l.214) via power, but this pretence is inevitably exposed by their own mortal limitations - everyone finally makes a mistake. "'Deep night / Caught them ere evening'" (ll.214-215).

Lines 215-227 speak of Napoleon, "'The Child of a fierce hour'", as an example of this process of defeat through lust for power. "'he sought to win / The world, and lost all it did contain / Of greatness'" (ll.217-219). Power is inevitably self-defeating because it does not acknowledge its own limitations and mortality. The adage that "pride comes before a fall" is illustrated in the image of Napoleon falling from "'the peak / From which a thousand climbers have before / Fall'n...'" (ll.222-224).

Once again, the speaker's reaction to his vision is recorded. His description of Napoleon as "the great form.../ Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak" (ll.225-226) shows an awe of him that regrets, or is at least shocked at, his present state of debasement. The speaker compares him favourably with the later European leaders who rode on the wave of Napoleon's downfall, the 'pigmies' who took advantage of a world weakened by Napoleon's wars. The example leads the speaker to the general reflection: "much I grieved to think how power and will / In opposition

¹¹³ The use of this metaphor is ironic: though they can repress the external mutinies around them through an exercise of power, they cannot deal with internal mutinies in the same manner.

rule our mortal day- / And why God made irreconcilable
/ Good and the means of good" (ll.228-231). As Reiman's footnote in the Norton edition remarks, this quotation recalls the words of a fury in Prometheus Unbound, who says much the same thing in an effort to lead Prometheus into despair.¹¹⁴ Certainly the will/power separation disturbed Shelley, and though Reiman believes that despair is not Shelley's final position in either Prometheus Unbound or "The Triumph of Life", this is a clear statement of the speaker's feelings at this juncture. Reiman also believes that the speaker is at this point commenting abstractly, but it may be that the statement applies more directly to Napoleon's story than it first appears. When Napoleon had the power, he had not the will to do good; he refused simply to bring peace and prosperity to France, but lusted for wider power. Conversely, the rulers of the subdued nations, who at this stage wanted good in the form of freedom and fraternity, had not the power to effect it. However, when Napoleon lost his power to them, they simultaneously lost the will to do good, abusing the weakened world in their renewed lust for power. We are reminded of Lord Acton's dictum: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

A minor, but intriguing point arises in this extract, in that the speaker blames God for the tragic separation between power and will (l.230). The Christian God does not really feature in this poem (except perhaps as a reference for irony, as in the opening lines) - though extrapolations assuming the existence of such a God do occur quite frequently, in mentions of Heaven and Hell. In fact, this is the only mention of God in the poem, and the context indicates Shelley's attitude to such a deity, and why

¹¹⁴ Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.461.

he cannot accept its existence. A loving Christian God could not create this impasse for humanity (the separation of will and power). It is Shelley's hope, at this stage in the poem, that this crippling irreconcilability does not utterly deplete the human spark of imaginative will. In attributing the problem to what he saw as the objectified product of the human mind - God - Shelley indirectly emphasises the power of that human mind.¹¹⁵ The suggestion is that, as with the multitude observed by the speaker at the beginning of the poem, the problems here are self-created, brought on by the malignant influence of Life. The speaker's despair, then, is at this human inability to heal itself, at the progression of history repeating the same mistakes: "and for despair / I half disdained mine eye's desire to fill / With the spent vision of the times that were / And scarce have ceased to be..." (ll.231-234). But by the same token, the human mind may yet have the strength to retain some control, and to act. This is why Rousseau feels he must try to arrest the speaker's despair.¹¹⁶

So he continues his history lesson, pointing out "'the spoilers spoiled'" (l.235) - Voltaire, Frederick the Great, Kant, Catherine the Great, Leopold II - all the figures of the Enlightenment. In the battle with Life, these finally lost, because like Napoleon, they refused to accept their own frailty. The Enlightenment philosophy promulgated human reason as the tool to achieve freedom and perfection, to reinstate the Golden Age. Their inability to perceive the fact that human reason is fallible and cut off

¹¹⁵ See how Prometheus in Prometheus Unbound creates his oppressor Jupiter by believing that he exists.

¹¹⁶ The irony here is that by the end of his narration, Rousseau himself is in a state of despair, unable to see a way out of humanity's situation.

from the absolutes of reality made them blind to self-knowledge and so to the "mutinies within".

Rousseau distinguishes himself from this company, as in life the historical figure of Rousseau rejected the rationalists. In lines 240-243 he asserts: "'I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object'." The implication is that whilst the rationalists were finally betrayed by their own minds, Rousseau, the great prophet of instinctive emotion, was overcome because he could not admit the limited, flawed nature of his "heart". This explains the last lines of the extract quoted above. Rousseau's desire was to tap into the 'natural man', to return to a state of natural morality and harmony. The problem was that this required him to trust utterly in his instincts, which, of course, were fallible and debased under the influence of Life. Even the vicissitudes of Life - time passing into old age, tears and sorrows, the infamous reputation that the historical Rousseau earned, and finally even death - even these were able to impress upon him the fact that his implicit faith in his instinctive, natural emotions could not achieve for him his object. Rather, what began as a good 'fire', showing the excesses of rationalism, exploded and finally consumed itself: the mortal desire in Rousseau took over the spark and turned it into the means of Rousseau's corruption. Once again, we see how Life has an individual create his own source of corruption.

We are beginning to perceive the state of personal desire that Shelley perceives as humanity's great stumbling-block, placed by Life. He restates it in another way in the famous lines from his essay "A Defence of Poetry": "Men, from causes too intricate to be here discussed, had become insensible and selfish: their own will had become feeble, and

yet they were its slaves, and thence the slaves of the will of others: lust, fear, avarice, cruelty and fraud, characterised a race amongst whom no one was to be found capable of creating in form, language, or institution.¹¹⁷ Shelley is here speaking of the Dark Ages, but the description is applicable to the situation in "The Triumph of Life" because in both Shelley sees the reason for this state of affairs to be "the extinction of the poetical principle".¹¹⁸ This "poetical principle" is closely related to an earlier, well-known phrase from the same essay: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own."¹¹⁹ It is the ability to put oneself into the "the place of another and of many others", to make "the pains and pleasures of [one's] species" one's own, that leads to the poetical principle, or the ability to "imagine intensely and comprehensively".¹²⁰ For Shelley, humanity corrupts itself when it relinquishes will to self-obsessed desire; it is at its most beautiful when it exerts will to deny its own self-indulgent desires and to live in society, to take part in the unity of humanity, to act with and for others.¹²¹ "The Triumph of Life" illustrates the 'Dark

¹¹⁷ Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.496.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.487.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.487-488.

¹²¹ Shelley's own life became a testament to this philosophy, particularly in his last years. His solicitude for Mary; his mediation between Clare and Byron, even when he was becoming increasingly irritated with the latter; his constant financial support of Godwin; his aid to the Hunts who were travelling out to Italy - all suggest a man for whom "a going out" of oneself was a central motivation.

Ages' of humanity, where the poetical principle is at a low ebb, and where the 'I' of the poem - both speaker and reader - is constantly challenged to renew the spark.¹²²

What must be noted here is an implicit difficulty that becomes more and more evident as the poem progresses. Reiman's footnote to the above extracts from "A Defence" links Shelley's ideas of "going out" with Plato's Symposium. "One of Socrates' key sentences in Shelley's translation of the dialogue reads: 'Love, therefore, and everything else that desires anything, desires that which is absent and beyond his reach, that which it has not, that which is not itself, that which it wants...'.¹²³" This is a clear adumbration of the Lacanian theory of absence and desire outlined above, further proof that Shelley was thinking along these lines. What is therefore immediately apparent is how humanity's best action derives from exactly the same emotional need that also produces humanity's corruption. Desire leads to Love and the poetic principle, but it also leads to self-obsession and corruption. This makes it clear why the former is so difficult to maintain, and the latter so overwhelmingly prevalent. Shelley's growing awareness of this terrible paradox causes the increasing sense of hopelessness in this poem.

That the speaker is challenged by all that Rousseau is showing him becomes obvious. "'Let them pass,'" he says of the Enlightenment figures,

¹²² Shelley's letter to Leigh Hunt on January 25, 1822, illustrates that he viewed his present day in much the same way as he did the 'Dark Ages': "My firm persuasion is that the mass of mankind as things are arranged at present, are cruel deceitful and selfish, and always on the watch to surprize [sic] those few who are not." (Letters, p.351.)

¹²³ Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.487. The same idea is reiterated in the Essay on Love.

... - 'the world and its mysterious doom
Is not so much more glorious than it was
That I desire to worship those who drew
New figures on its false and fragile glass
As the old faded.' (ll.243-248)

Ironic gloom again seems to be the speaker's primary reaction. The Enlightenment figures are simply temporary paintings on the glass that is the world - mere transitory decorations, of no more worth than those they replace. History and humanity are simply a series of arbitrary happenings, a view that Rousseau confirms in lines 248-251. The image of the earth as a bubble of glass is provocative: glass is both brittle and fragile, as is human existence. More importantly, it reflects - often in a false or distorted way - all forms that are thrown upon it. This is patently the effect that Life has on the individuals of the triumph: distortion. Moreover, this glass reflects "shadows", which are another reductive result of Life's influence on humanity.

* * * *

Rousseau's description of the captives continues. He indicates "all that is mortal of great Plato", who was finally subdued to Life by means of love for the youth Aster.¹²⁴ Once more we see how the mortal aspect of humanity - desire - conquers and corrupts the spark of imagination and will. Aristotle and Alexander are seen next in the procession. Alexander, like Napoleon, commands great respect from the speaker, and yet the emphasis on his enslaving power ("Dominion / Followed as tame as a vulture in a chain", ll. 261-262) suggests a scenario of self-defeat similar to Napoleon's. Aristotle, on the other hand, had more in

¹²⁴ See Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.462, footnote.

common with the Enlightenment names; he also subdued and controlled via his dogma of reason. He was "throned in new thoughts of men" and kept the "jealous keys of truth's eternal doors" (ll.267-268). According to Shelley, Aristotle's restrictive scholastic formulae prevented the emergence of scientific empiricism. Again, this is a non-poetic role: it is a selfish desire at the expense of the rest of humanity. Eventually Bacon, the great founder of empirical science, breaks down these Aristotelian doors that hide the truth; he leaps "like lightning" (continuing the metaphor of the spark) out of darkness to reveal and control Nature's workings (ll.270-273).

Rousseau now points out "the great bards of old", presumably Homer and his like. He tells how they

'...only quelled
The passion which they sung, as by their
strain
May well be known: their living melody
Tempers its own contagion to the vein
Of those who are infected with it -...'
(ll.274-278)

This cryptic remark is another that has led to much discussion. Reiman's reading is, I think, the most helpful: these early poets repressed their own emotions by fusing them with their 'higher' natures; "they transmuted their private, personal feelings... into universal art".¹²⁵ As such, their poetry never inflames, but only coincides with, the passions of the reader; this "living" poetry is all things to all people.¹²⁶ This, Rousseau declares, contrasts with his

¹²⁵ Reiman, p.55.

¹²⁶ The use of the word "tempers" in these lines therefore equates with the earlier use of the word in relation to Rousseau (1.243). In both, to 'temper'

own work:

'- I

Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!
And so my words were seeds of misery -
Even as the deeds of others.'

(ll.278-281)

All of Rousseau's passions were poured into his writings, as befits a man who has implicit faith in the ability of instinctive, natural emotions to reveal truth. Again, this was a mistake; Rousseau fears that his writings have inflamed others to worse passions. The speaker moves to comfort him - Rousseau is, after all, his respected mentor and guide - by pointing out that Rousseau's words never produced the evil influence of the deeds of the Roman-Christian alliance, representatives of which are presumably passing in the triumph at this moment. This conflation of political and religious power effected, in Shelley's eyes, a tyranny that dictated to mankind for centuries by spreading the "plague of blood and gold" (l.287). This 'canonized' power via might and wealth had infinitely more influence than Rousseau's writings. The speaker further elaborates how the papacy rose "like shadows" between Man and god, an eclipse that came to be seen and worshipped instead of "the true Sun it quenched" (l.292).¹²⁷ This use of the

means to 'adjust'.

¹²⁷ The ironies in the reversal of traditional upper- and lower-case letters in reference to Man and god are profound. The god that humanity has created (hence the capitalised 'Man' as creator) and deified into 'God' is eventually taken over through Man's own lust for authority, and so returns to the subordinate, created state as 'god'. One thinks of Prometheus Unbound, where Jupiter is only given power, and, indeed, existence, by Prometheus' acknowledgement of him.

capitalised "Sun" as an image for God/god recalls the "Sun" of the opening lines of the poem, and so reinforces the religious readings of those lines. Here, though, the Sun has been "quenched" by a greater force, the eclipsing moon. This similarly recalls the arrival of the chariot of Life at lines 75-80, in which "a cold glare... obscured... the Sun." This cold glare is, as we have seen, immediately compared to the "young moon" (l.79). The echo is potent in this context; the central movement of greater subsuming lesser power that comprises "The Triumph of Life" is here used to illustrate Shelley's peculiarly inverted view of religion - finally the greater power (humanity) overwhelms the lesser power (the created god). Rousseau's comment on this ironic situation, in which the religious leaders effectively kill religion by hijacking it, is to the point: "Their power was given / But to destroy" (ll.292-293).

In what has become a recognisable habit of Rousseau's, he immediately turns from this observation to talk about his own past. This is a delightfully subtle, and rather humorous irony on the man. Rousseau's problem, finally, was self-obsession, a total focus on his own emotions and responses to nature. Here we see it in action: Rousseau cannot speak about others for long before having to return to himself to catalogue his own relation to the various figures in the pageant.¹²⁸ Here he compares himself favourably to the negative power of the above-mentioned religious leaders. "I / Am one of those who created, even / If it be but a world of agony" (ll.293-295). Despite the egotism, Rousseau is quite right. His spark lit beacons that are still burning;

¹²⁸ Note that in the space of twenty lines, of which Rousseau speaks only half, the syntax is structured so as to allow two lines ending with "I" (278 and 293). In both cases, the end-emphasis tends to stress the ego-centric nature of the statements.

the eclipse of the papacy only managed to put out the light of the Sun.

v (11.309-433)

This brings us to the centre of Shelley's poem, the dream within the dream. Rousseau's life-story is understandably seen by many readers as the heart of the poem, not only structurally but thematically as well. This becomes problematic because of the enigmatic nature of the excerpt. There is little agreement on the basic facts of the narrative, let alone on what such events might mean. Is Rousseau describing his physical birth into life, and thence into adulthood, or is this 'awakening' his path from childhood into adulthood? May it not even be a description of his death and his 'birth' into the afterlife, which turns out to be a purgatorial reliving of his mortal existence? All are popular readings,¹²⁹ and all three obviously influence the interpretation of the relevant section, particularly the role of the Shape all light. Like David Quint,¹³⁰ I often find the critical argument over Rousseau's 'awakening' a refined form of hair-splitting. If one

¹²⁹ The main 'physical birth' proponents are Baker, Butter, Matthews, M. Allott, Reiman and Cameron. Those supporting the movement from youth into adulthood are Grabo, King-Hele, Bloom and Rubin. The 'afterlife' proponents are Hodgson, Robinson and Milne. Duffy reads the incident as an example of reverie. My own argument comes closest to Quint's, who talks of a birth into consciousness, and I also believe that Bostetter's and McGann's emphasis on the fact that the whole experience is simply a dream, is vital.

¹³⁰ Quint, pp.639-657.

follows a reading that Rousseau's experience occurs in life, then the two main explanations can be conflated to be seen as the birth of consciousness. Lacanian psychoanalytical theories can once more help us here. They tell us that the infant child only develops a sense of consciousness when it recognises itself to be a separately functioning individual, no longer one in its primal world of sensation. Consciousness, then, is born out of the apprehension of separateness, of loss of things that the infant previously felt were part of it. The child moves from a position where it cannot yet distinguish the world from itself, to a realisation that the world is apart from it.¹³¹ As such, Rousseau's 'birth' from an unknown state into a state of sublime but separate consciousness can be seen as this perception of selfhood. Lacan describes the stage that follows this 'birth' as the Imaginary order, in which the child sees itself as the centre of its world, with everything around it existing in a one-to-one relationship with it. The child lives very much on a sensual plane, apprehending externalities by their ability to give pleasure or pain. Rousseau's brief time in the "valley of perpetual dream" can be seen to correspond with this. When he drinks from the cup offered by the Shape all light, he moves into Lacan's third stage, which is called the Symbolic order; here, Lacan says, the child suddenly becomes aware that life is not focussed on it, but that he/she is simply part of a network of social interaction which restrains and represses the individual. "[A] system mediates between the child and its desire...this full social being is founded on

¹³¹One can see how this birth of consciousness precipitates the human condition of desire based on loss or lack, which, I have argued, is Shelley's understanding of the human situation in this poem. See above pp.63-64.

repression, the deferral of pleasure".¹³²

Miriam Allott, in her essay "The Reworking of a Literary Genre: Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'",¹³³ makes a connection between Shelley's poem and Keats' image of human life as "a mansion of many apartments". She writes: "In [Keats'] celebrated May 1818 letter, the first apartment is described as 'The infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain so long as we do not think.' The second is 'The Chamber of Maiden-Thought', where 'we become intoxicated with the light and atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there forever in delight'." Allott continues, describing as one of the effects of this intoxication

that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man - of convincing one's nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression... This Chamber of Maiden-Thought becomes gradually darkened and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages...¹³⁴

This reiteration of Keats' image is uncanny in its prefiguring of the Lacanian model of human development that I have described - and, I think, indicates the appropriateness of using either model to illuminate Shelley's account of Rousseau's dream in "The Triumph of Life". Allott demonstrates how Shelley may have

¹³² Steven Connor, Charles Dickens, (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985). The reference is from p.113, but I have also drawn indirectly from the whole of chapter six.

¹³³ Allott, pp.239-278.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.264-265.

become aware of Keats' ideas when they were both attending the Hunts' discussion group before Shelley left England. Even if this was not the reason for the mutual ideas, the phenomenon is not so unexpected: both Shelley and Keats were concerned with similar concerns and were influenced by the same 'zeitgeist'.

* * * *

We will return to the Lacanian/Keatsian reading of Rousseau's dream in a moment; at present my purpose to this point has been simply to indicate my approach amidst the range of other interpretations offered. We can return to those interpretations now to introduce us to Rousseau's dream. Bloom quotes lines 308-311 (of an earlier text than Reiman's corrected 1965 text) to support his argument.

'- In the April prime,
When all the forest-tips began to burn
With kindling green, touched by the azure
clime
Of the young season, I was laid asleep...'

Bloom comments that April is not the beginning of the vegetative year, but is its "first prime"; the "young year" is not the new year. He adds that Rousseau is "laid asleep", implying that he has previously been awake. Bloom therefore concludes that Rousseau is not relating his own physical birth, but his passage from a childhood state into a more mature state. He uses Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" to illustrate his point (as do many commentators), "in which a poet passes from his initial vision into a time when vision ceases in its original sense, and another kind of vision may or may not succeed it".¹³⁵ Baker, on the other hand, uses the Wordsworthian "Ode" to support his own

¹³⁵ Bloom, p.263. Bloom's whole argument as outlined here occurs on pp.262-265.

argument that Rousseau's experience is that of birth, quoting line 59 of that poem - "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting". Reiman disturbs the already muddy waters by correcting Bloom's manuscript of "The Triumph of Life" to read "I found myself asleep" at line 311. This adjustment removes a rather important strut from Bloom's argument.

What becomes vitally apparent here is something that appears to have been overlooked by most commentators.¹³⁶ The line above mentioned - "I found myself asleep" (or its earlier counterpart "I was laid asleep") - does not indicate an awakening or birth at all, but patently speaks of a putting to sleep. "I found myself asleep" is a description of that strange subconscious awareness that one sometimes has whilst dreaming - an awareness that one is dreaming. So what Rousseau narrates here is that one fine spring day he fell asleep, and found himself dreaming that he was lying under a mountain by a stream, where he saw a sunrise, and so on. Rousseau's dream is of an idyllic state, which I would read as Lacan's Imaginary order of immature consciousness, but he is recalling his experience of this state in his dream. There is later evidence in the poem to support this interpretation. At line 334, Rousseau comments that his present situation, talking with the speaker, is 'reality', the "harsh world in which I wake to weep"; presumably his waking is from the dream he is now describing. When he speaks to the Shape all light, he describes his situation as "this valley of perpetual dream" (l.397) - and indeed, this dream of Rousseau's takes dreaming as its theme, as the repeated dream imagery indicates (e.g. ll.367, 393). Further, when he wakes from drinking the cup of Nepenthe, the vestiges of his dream remain with him. He says at lines 427-428 that

¹³⁶ Except McGann and Bostetter, as I have previously mentioned.

the lost Shape all light is dimmer than "a day-
appearing dream, / The ghost of a forgotten form of
sleep."

The complexities of this situation are profound, and once more direct us to Shelley's exploration in this poem of the interchangeability of dream and reality - the layered nature of experience. Rousseau here dreams of a reality, his early consciousness; the moment of physical wakening from that dream simultaneously relives the moment of his real psychological awakening, when his consciousness was pushed into a more mature state. This dream of a remembered reality occurs within Rousseau's reality (as a lapsed dancer around the chariot), and, to deepen the complexity, Rousseau's reality occurs within the speaker's dream. Furthermore, the speaker's reality, briefly outlined in the opening forty lines of the poem, occurs within Shelley's and our 'dream'. The questions this implicitly raises about the status of our supposed 'reality' are unnerving, to say the least!

All these complexities are related to the ostensible similarities in the physical surroundings of both Rousseau's dream and the speaker's situation at the start of the poem. Both are lying near a mountain, surrounded by a spring scene of idyllic natural beauty in which a body of water is featured. Shelley wishes us to notice that the experiences of the two are vitally similar, and we have already seen how he does this (above, pp.45). However, there are crucial differences in their situations which must also be noted, because they reflect crucial differences between Rousseau's and the speaker's attitudes to their experiences. Most commentators¹³⁷ describe the cavern in the mountain (in which

¹³⁷ Notably A. C. Bradley, Baker and Bloom.

Rousseau's dream begins) as a ravine running right through the mountain, splitting it from east to west. The well is located at a central point halfway through the mountain. The rising sun therefore shines along the length of the ravine. That it should start in the east is indicated by its description as an "orient cavern" at line 344. However, close examination of the poem reveals no other support for this rather strange geography, and I find it unnecessary. I rather suspect that the commentators' desire to somehow have the cavern facing westward arises out of a need to match it up exactly with the speaker's physical situation, something that I believe Shelley did not want to do. It seems to me that the description is of a deep cavern in the eastward face of the mountain, so catching the light of the rising sun. The well is in the cavern, and so is also in reach of the dawn's rays. It flows eastward out of the cavern. This position is underlined by the Shape all light's relation to the dawn ("A Shape all light, which with one hand did fling / Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn", ll.352-353).

There are other differences from the speaker's situation. The speaker lies looking out over a sea which he describes as "the Deep" (l.27), and this very description reveals the challenging nature of this abyss for the speaker. The water in Rousseau's situation is, by contrast, a "gentle rivulet" (l.314); infinitely less threatening and more inviting. Finally, of course, the speaker faces west, with the rising sun at his back, watching the night 'flee'. Rousseau, on the other hand, faces the east and watches the sun rise - "And as I looked the bright omnipresence / Of morning through the orient cavern flowed" (ll.343-344). All these differences tend to suggest a willingness in Rousseau to greet the arrival of the greater power of the sun, whereas the speaker

tended to align himself with the fleeing stars of the night. He wanted to exert an individuality by wilfully refusing to join in nature's welcome of the authoritative sun, and yet, paradoxically, this very act is subverted by the movement of the greater power, the sun, in subsuming the stars. Rousseau, however, is unaware of either of these aspects. He bathes in the beauty of the coming sun, is obedient to the Shape all light's "sweet command" (l.403), and finally plunges willingly into the train of the chariot of Life. Rousseau's blind, unthinking faith in his own instincts leads him into accepting and indeed welcoming these things; the speaker appears to be far more mindful and suspicious of their ambiguities.

Rousseau now continues to describe his dream. The stream that calmly sweeps through his grove creates a sound "'which all who hear must needs forget / All... / Which they had known before that hour of rest'" (ll.318-320). The sound has effectively wiped Rousseau's memory of his 'reality' as a victim of Life's chariot; gone are the pleasure and pain of his existence after this Imaginary state of early consciousness. He has returned to this childlike existence and the power of this 'forgetting' dream is so profound that a mother in the same position would not even remember "'the only child who died upon her breast'" (l.322), nor a king his dispossessed crown - to both, the most significant losses of their lives. Rousseau even manages to direct this condition towards the speaker who, we remember, fell into his dream at the start of the poem troubled by "thoughts which must remain untold" (l.21).

'Thou wouldest forget thus vainly to
deplore
ILLS, which if ills, can find no cure
from thee,

The thought of which no other sleep will
quell.'

(11.327-329)¹³⁸

Indeed, the speaker's dream has presumably only reiterated the nature of those thoughts, rather than providing a release from them. Rousseau's sleep instead takes him back to his simplistic childish consciousness (though it is questionable whether this provides a release either). He reflects that the nature of his life before that sleep - whether a 'heaven' or a 'hell' - is unknown to him. Was there a time before consciousness, an existence outside this one? Neo-Platonist readers of Shelley argue that he is suggesting here the ideal reality of Platonic philosophy. Reiman, although himself a neo-Platonic commentator, replies that Rousseau's inability to remember anything of this alleged Platonic existence contradicts "Plato's and Wordsworth's myths in which the soul can recall an antenatal existence."¹³⁹ This is not strictly true, as Wordsworth writes that "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" (my

¹³⁸ This shows Rousseau's growing sense of doubt throughout the poem. He seems to suspect that the speaker cannot finally effect a change or have an influence on the world (although he begins with the hope that something may be done). Rousseau's personal answer to Life is to retreat into the memory of his earlier egocentric and essentially sensual consciousness. Does Rousseau lock himself into a circular trap here - reverting to this egocentric existence in dream, which, of course, inevitably leads to the condition of desire and so to the deeper and traumatic consciousness of the chariot of Life? The only way to escape this consciousness is to revert in dreams to the previous time, but this means reliving the 'awakening' and the ensuing life, so one once more retreats... Angela Leighton also identifies this circularity: "[Rousseau] only remembers, as if over and over again, the event of waking into the oblivious light of Life..." (Leighton, p.173).

¹³⁹ Reiman, p.61.

underlining). I think that Shelley is making a brief mention here of a hope that has become distant. Rousseau may have existed in an ideal world before his birth, but the crucial point is that he is unaware of any other way of life; the 'sleep' of indulgence and the ensuing 'reality' of life are all he knows. The very uncertainty and obscurity of such an existence is the main focus in Shelley's mention of it. Of course, another possible reading is one that coincides with the emphasis on this being a dream for Rousseau: he simply does not remember the 'reality' of the triumph of Life, during which he has this dream. He knows he dreams, but the dream's potency is such that he cannot recall waking reality.

Having mentioned Reiman, it is perhaps fair to allude to the formal allegorical interpretation he has made of these lines outlining Rousseau's situation, because so many commentators have been heavily influenced by them. Reiman uses his wider schematized formula for interpreting Shelley's imagery to explain the features of the scene: "the stream symbolizes the course of an individual mortal life, whereas the well itself represents the individual human mind... The reflected image of the sun...I take to be a symbol of the human imagination".¹⁴⁰ The Shape all light is a vision of the human imagination, but because she is a product of the limited and the mortal, she is not of the Ideal. Hence, she is accompanied by Iris, the rainbow; a symbol of the "white radiance of eternity" refracted into the spectrum by the corrupting powers of sub-lunar, terrestrial existence.

While Reiman's allegories offer enlightening possibilities for interpretation, particularly in the light of previous poems by Shelley, I find the correlations a little too rigid, as already mentioned.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.62.

Moreover, these correlations assume a Platonic frame of reference behind the poem, and while it is clear that Shelley had completely absorbed and constantly used Platonic imagery, what is also clear in this poem is that traditional Platonic hopes are severely questioned.

A final comment on these scene-setting lines of 308-335. There is an obvious narrative link here with Dante's description of the river Lethe in the Purgatorio. In that work, Dante's attainment of Paradise, the new Eden, reveals to him a dual river; the first side, Lethe, brings oblivion concerning sin, and the second side, Eunoe, restores memory of sin but only as an occasion for divine grace.¹⁴¹ They must be drunk from in the correct order so as to recreate perfection. The similarities with Rousseau's situation are immediately striking. He, like Dante, encounters a river and a beautiful lady of light; he is made to drink by the lady, as is Dante, and both he and Dante experience oblivion as a result of the draught. Shelley obviously intended us to note the source,¹⁴² but as with the Petrarchan echoes, his purpose seems to be a parodic one. If Rousseau's rivulet is to be associated with the river of Paradise, and the Shape all light is to be associated with Matilda, then these symbols have been undeniably corrupted. Shelley conflates the two draughts of Lethe and Eunoe; Rousseau is already in an oblivious state of childish consciousness and the Shape all light's cup of Nepenthe ironically erases that state (like Lethe), and restores the memories of Rousseau's reality (like Eunoe). The final result, though, is far from perfect: Paradise has become the chariot of

¹⁴¹ Dante, Introduction, p.68.

¹⁴² See l.463, when Rousseau refers to "the falling stream's Lethean song".

Life. Shelley uses the Dantean images to show his own rejection of the Dantean world-view, and to replace it with his own scepticism.

* * * *

In his dream, Rousseau notices the "'trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun'" - yet another illustration of the movement of greater power consuming lesser power that runs through this poem. But what is this diviner light? There are several options. If this period is Rousseau's Imaginary state of childish consciousness, does this light refer to the time of pre-consciousness, when there was (presumably) unity? Such a reading again refers to the pre-existence of neo-Platonism and Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode". Alternatively, the narrative can be read as simply describing the faded light of the stars of night, thus recalling the start of the poem when the speaker describes the fleeing night, and so tying Rousseau's experience here into the general movement of inevitability in the poem. It is significant that later Rousseau narrates how the Shape all light fades in the light of the chariot, leaving only a glimmer of her presence. As she is linked with the morning star, Lucifer or Venus, she is a star of night. Lines 336-339 therefore prefigure this occurrence.

The critical aspect of the nature of Rousseau's consciousness at this time is that he is without the benefit of mature, rational faculties. Oblivion, glossed as 'forgetfulness', is emphasised twice (ll.331 and 341), and Rousseau comments that the sounds he hears confuse his sense (l.341). In this egocentric, immature existence, he can only follow his immediate sensory instincts, and they are utterly

seduced by the scene he now encounters.¹⁴³

The rising sun is suddenly reflected in the pool in the cavern, making the water's surface burn and glow "like gold", and flashing through the trees of the grove like "emerald fire". Within the sun's reflection on the water the Shape all light becomes discernible. It is important that the Shape's position - within and part of the sun's light - is understood. Though the Shape is a lesser light than the sun, and is eventually and inevitably subsumed by the sun (ll.412-433), it is nevertheless associated with the sun, though separate. In effect, she heralds the sun, coming as she does at sunrise. This explains her later comparison with the morning star (at line 414). What this means, I suggest, is that the Shape is not to be judged morally, as critics seem wont to do. It is not a matter of whether the Shape is good (the Matilda figure) or bad (the Circe figure); rather it is a matter of her inevitability, her involvement in a process of necessity.

Many commentators see the Shape as another of Shelley's ideal female figures, as he searches for his 'epipsyche'. The figure in "Alastor", the Witch of Atlas, and Epipsychidion are all obvious Shelleyan antecedents to her. Reiman has established a definite link with Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse, by which Julie becomes the Shape all light and Saint-Preux's love for Julie is Rousseau's pursuit of the mortal vision of the Ideal. Both sets of antecedents reiterate the notion of the Shape's being a mortal version of Ideal love and beauty - and while this may

¹⁴³ It is ironic that the mature Rousseau still has the same tendency: to quote that "Ode" yet again, "The Child is father of the Man." ("Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", in Romantic Poetry and Prose, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling [1973; rpt. New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981], p.176).

or may not be so, what is important is Shelley's attitude to such versions. Finally he perceives them as sources of disillusionment, because "the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits clad in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal" (Letters, p.401). (Note the attenuating faith in the Ideal in the use of "perhaps".) I do not wish to limit the Shape's 'meaning' to this idea of a female epipsyche, as will become evident. The reading does nevertheless stress the fatal flaw in Rousseau's psyche,¹⁴⁴ and the means by which he is seduced by desire into Life and its corruption.

For this reason, the Shape is described in terms of great beauty, using images associated with the mystical female guides of Dante and Milton, and Shelley's earlier poetry. As Quint has observed, though, the Shape is depicted in far more sensuous terms than either Milton's or Dante's counterparts. Quint calls her "captivating, erotic and musical",¹⁴⁵ and Rousseau's account of her supports such an analysis. In another passage of sensual imagery, she is described in terms of sight (accompanied by Iris' "many coloured scarf" at line 357), sound ("sing / A silver music" at line 354-355, "the stream / That

¹⁴⁴ Presumably Shelley was aware that it was his own fatal flaw, as well.

¹⁴⁵ Quint, p.650. Quint, however, draws a different conclusion from this observation, suggesting that the Shape is ultimately an objectification of Rousseau's own desires. While I feel this idea takes us into a whole new interpretation of the poem, it nevertheless has relevance to my own reading. As part of the inevitable process that sees humanity move from simplistic sensual consciousness to an awareness of life as a state of thwarted desire in a dehumanizing system, the Shape will operate in the form or mode suited to each individual's idiosyncracies. Rousseau is seduced by sensual beauty; the speaker is assailed via a different means - perhaps his sense of his own weakness?

whispered with delight" at lines 365-367, "wondrous music" at line 369 and "ceaseless song" at line 375), touch ("feet which kist / The dancing foam" at line 370-371, "palms so tender" at line 362 and "swept the bosom of the stream" at line 365) - and even eventually taste, in the glass "mantling with bright Nepenthe" at line 359. Sensual vividness of overwhelming force seems to be the desired effect in this passage, as the simplistic, egocentric and instinctive consciousness of Rousseau in this dream is rapidly and inevitably mesmerised. It is notable, though, that the Shape is totally ethereal, despite these heavily sensual descriptions of her. She makes no impression as she walks on the stream (ll.361-362), and she is related to insubstantial things: she treads on "waves" and "foam", she glides on "the airs", on "slant morning beams" or on "soft shadows", and she dances to "the ceaseless song of leaves and winds..." (ll.370-376).¹⁴⁶ This strange, seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of sensuality and ethereality further illustrates Shelley's understanding of the nature of perception: we (or in this case, Rousseau) attempt to describe and define an experience in the only way we know - via the senses. The more panoramic the sensual description, the more we feel we are conveying the experience successfully. But finally the experience is unknowable, indefinable; it is essentially ethereal to us and beyond our ability to pin it down. This is Rousseau's experience with the Shape. She is, as several later commentators

¹⁴⁶ This ethereality recalls the speaker's description of the shadows that obsess the multitude around the chariot at the start of his vision. The images of clouds and absent birds (ll.62-62) emphasise the insubstantiality of these obsessions, and suggest that Rousseau's obsession here is similarly without substance.

have suggested, finally unknowable.¹⁴⁷

Having said that, however, there are certain associations that one can make with the Shape that make it easier to attempt an explanation of her effect on Rousseau, even if we cannot solve the riddles of her existence and source. The first is suggested in the simile at lines 378-381, where the Shape is associated with the rising moon. She is like "a shape... / ...athwart the rising moon"; similarly, the Shape all light precedes the coming of the chariot. As we have seen, the moon is used almost exclusively in the poem as a symbol for the chariot of Life.¹⁴⁸ The connection therefore becomes prophetic, tying the Shape all light in with the Shape in the chariot, and so reinforcing the Shape all light as being part of the movement of greater over lesser. This is stressed again at lines 389-390, when the Shape begins to act upon Rousseau.

'As Day upon the threshold of the east
Treads out lamps of night...
 ... - like day she came,
Making the night a dream.'

This is a direct reiteration of the opening lines of the poem, when the glorious sunrise overtakes the stars of night, which are "laid asleep" (l.23), thus making night "a dream". This movement was repeated when the chariot's light (with its moon-like attributes) overwhelmed the light of day. At this stage in Rousseau's dream, though, the movement is

¹⁴⁷ Butter was the earliest commentator to write this; Quint, Abbey, de Man, Rajan and Cronin all present variations on the theme.

¹⁴⁸ It is also interesting that the topography of this simile (a lake between two rocks) recalls Rousseau's geographical surroundings (between two mountains by a stream).

only half-completed; the Shape, associated with the sun, has overwhelmed the 'night stars' of Rousseau's mind. The process will continue inexorably with the greater subsumption to follow, in which the chariot arrives and overwhelms the sun's emblem, the Shape all light. As Allott remarks, Rousseau's "earlier happier state precipitates rather than merely precedes the crisis."¹⁴⁹

This is the essential structural movement of the poem. Shelley (Rousseau?) complicates this second account of it, by using imagery to compare the Shape all light to the moon, the morning star and the sun - every facet of the progression. This complication has tended to obscure the essential movement involved. There is a deliberate reason for it, however. In associating the Shape all light with every stage of the process (night stars, sun, moon-chariot) Shelley can emphasize the basic unity of the process, in that these various lights are part of an inevitable movement that describes human maturation from preconsciousness through simple perception to full disillusioned consciousness. The Shape represents the force that conducts humanity into the third stage of Life, but she is related to every stage.

Let us examine how she does this with Rousseau. He tells the speaker that the movement of the Shape all light's feet, and the "sweet tune" (l.382) that he hears, have the effect of blotting out his thoughts. As we have seen, his instinctively sensual consciousness is utterly vulnerable to the sensual beauty of the Shape and her accoutrements. He becomes mesmerized by her and relinquishes his power of will to her. Indeed, he compares his mind to fiery embers that are strewn on the ground for her to trample out into "the dust of death" (l.388). This continues the

¹⁴⁹ Allott, p.273.

central image of "sparks" that has been used both by the speaker and Rousseau to describe the innate individual will in humanity. The sparks in the dancers around the chariot are kindled but then extinguished into dust; the spark in Rousseau has lit "a thousand beacons" (l.207); similarly, the spark is a "living flame" in the "sacred few" (ll.128-130).

As with the dancers around the chariot, Rousseau's will is captivated and crushed through desire - he is seduced by the Shape all light, caught "between desire and shame" (l.394). His awareness of a change in his consciousness is evidenced in the line: "'All that was seemed as if it had been not'" (l.385); already the egocentric Imaginary state is being overtaken by a new and deeper awareness that cannot remember the simplicity of the earlier state. Instead, desire has become more profound and yet more problematic, as Rousseau begins to experience desire for another, for knowledge of self, and for knowledge of the world.

... - 'If, as it doth seem,
Thou comest from the realm without a name,
Into this valley of perpetual dream,
Show whence I came, and where I am, and
why -
Pass not away upon the passing stream.'

(ll.395-399)

Rousseau continues to worry about his life before this dream - either the life of waking reality, or a life of preexistence, before his emergence into consciousness. (It does not matter which interpretation the reader chooses, as the Shape presumably knows about both.) The Shape all light seems to him to be from such an existence and so can provide knowledge about his own position in that and

this life. His questions presage the speaker's question at the end of the poem, although the speaker then will be asking from a deeper sense of knowledge and disillusionment. He will have reached the Symbolic, mature consciousness which Rousseau, in his dream of memory, is only now entering. By the end of his own narration, Rousseau, too, has that deeper sense of disillusioned knowledge.

Rousseau's description of his position as being in a "valley of perpetual dream" shows his growing awareness that this existence is transitory, ephemeral and uncertain. He is aware of knowledge that is unattainable to him. We have already seen how he uses dream imagery heavily in describing this period. The temptation to extrapolate from this description a metaphor for life as it is depicted in this poem is unavoidable. For Shelley as he writes "The Triumph of Life", mortal life is a "valley of perpetual dream" where absolute knowledge is unavailable, where one is aware of one's transitory and ephemeral existence and wonders (or hopes) about an existence beyond consciousness, and where one is constantly overwhelmed by new "dreams", even more nightmarish and apparently real than the last. "Arise and quench thy thirst" (l.400), answers the Shape all light to Rousseau's questions of desire, and he does not hesitate to obey her. Miriam Allott, in noting the Keatsian echoes in "The Triumph", makes the very pertinent observation that "The Fall of Hyperion" provides a useful gloss on this poem. There is, firstly, the emphasis on the difference between dreamer and poet: the latter acts ("pours out a balm upon the World" ¹⁵⁰) whereas the former does not. The implicit sense of responsibility in "The Triumph of Life" is, as we have seen, urgent. Secondly, though, the general structure of Keats' poem

¹⁵⁰ "The Fall of Hyperion", Romantic Poetry and Prose, p.548, l.201.

is similar to Rousseau's dream. The speaker in "The Fall of Hyperion" is transported to "the emblematic remnants of a prelapsarian existence of unalloyed happiness",¹⁵¹ where he drinks from a "cool vessel of transparent juice"¹⁵² and then experiences his tragic vision. Obviously both poets are using a classically-old motif, but the similarity is still striking. (So is the fact that both poets break off their poems without finishing.) For Keats' speaker, the desire to drink is overwhelming - "And appetite / More yearning than on Earth I ever felt / Growing within...".¹⁵³ This is also the case with Rousseau. Indeed, the inevitability of the Shape all light's offer to Rousseau being accepted is underlined in lines 401-404.

'And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand
Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,
I rose; and bending at her sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she
raised...'

Rousseau is unable to refuse her invitation - or rather, command - for the same reason that a flower cannot refuse to open to daybreak's sunshine.¹⁵⁴ It is a basic instinct or impulse that naturally enforces the action. Rousseau's growth into the deeper consciousness of a Lacanian Symbolic mode is part of natural human life; the Shape all light simply facilitates this growth. It becomes obvious, then, why it is irrelevant to talk about the Shape's moral

¹⁵¹ Allott, p.260.

¹⁵² "The Fall of Hyperion", p.545, l.42.

¹⁵³ Ibid, ll.38-40.

¹⁵⁴ It is again interesting to observe the Shape's relation to the sunlight of dawn.

value - she is simply part of an inevitable human process.

I have used these basic Lacanian theories because they provide a useful contextual framework for my reading. One may prefer to use more simplistic terms like 'innocence' and 'experience' for 'Imaginary' and 'Symbolic', but I have deliberately avoided these terms because they tend to carry value connotations. The movement from innocence to experience implies a process of corruption that is avoidable; my central point is that it is not avoidable. Moreover, it will have become clear that the implicit association of innocence with 'good' and experience with 'bad' is inapplicable in this poem: Rousseau's Imaginary state is characterised by sensual self-gratification and lack of rationality and will, whereas the Symbolic state, though horrific in its apprehension of Life's true nature, is nevertheless marked by wisdom and awareness.¹⁵⁵ If anything, the Lacanian terms approach a Blakean use of 'innocence' and 'experience', and I believe that Blake would have understood much of what was going on in this poem.

* * * *

Lines 405-411 are yet another cause for dissension amongst the commentators. What does Rousseau mean by the various waves and expunged animal tracks? Do they have direct correlation to Rousseau's experience as he is describing it? Before attempting to answer this, we should note two general points from the simile. The first is the setting. The

¹⁵⁵ Again, the correlation between this Lacanian framework and the Keatsian one mentioned earlier is helpful here. The earlier existence in the room of Maiden-Thought is beautiful but limited, bound to personal apprehension of delight - it is "intoxicating". Keats emphasises that though we attempt to delay and remain in this chamber, it inevitably leads to the apprehension of human pain as the chamber darkens. See letter quoted on p.87.

Labradorean desert beach has suddenly been imposed over the previous scene in the same way that the speaker's vision of the dusty "public way" was superimposed on his picturesque surroundings at the start of the poem. In both cases, sight of the previous scene is impaired, though a strong awareness of it remains. Rousseau's drinking of the Nepenthe has woken him to the deeper Symbolic reality, and this awakening to Life paradoxically echoes the speaker's "waking dream" which alerts him to the realities of Life - the dusty desert, the frantic multitude and the merciless chariot.

Secondly, the simile of ll.405-411 is another reiteration of the power movement in the poem. Once again, a greater power is seen to prey upon a lesser power (the wolf chases the deer). Moreover, an even subtler example can be detected in the waves' action; the action of the tides is a greater power that subsumes the lesser power of the animals by erasing their transient tracks with its inevitable advance. It is worth remembering that the tides are controlled by the moon, who has come in the poem to represent the chariot of Life.

I believe that this second reiteration of the power movement is the basic import in these lines (405-411), and it would be a great mistake to miss it. Nevertheless, the (natural) desire to pin down Shelley's images remains with most readers, and we ask what the deer, wolf and waves correspond to in Rousseau's experience. Explanations are numerous. Matthews opines that "the sandy shore is the mind, the footprints are relics of thoughts that have recently occupied it, and the two successive waves are the two visions of the Shape and Life, that successively wash the mind clean of its previous contents"¹⁵⁶ - though he

¹⁵⁶ Matthews, p.116.

goes on to suggest that the image indicates Rousseau's timidity in not drinking from the cup of Nepenthe. Reiman sees the first wave as being the cup of Nepenthe and so holds out hope of redemption in the yet-to-break second wave. Indeed, he describes Rousseau's experience here as an Edenic Fall, wherein Rousseau learns, like Adam and Eve, the knowledge of good and evil. Such a reading seems to give moralistic overtones to a situation that is essentially divorced from morality. It implies that the 'Fall' is avoidable, and a redemption is within humanity's grasp. I would argue that neither statement is applicable to the situation in "The Triumph of Life". This 'Fall' is inevitable, unavoidable and irredeemable.

David Quint cites Yeats' glossing of the wolf as desire ("a more violent symbol of longing and desire than the hound"¹⁵⁷), and so explains the deer tracks as "the inaccessible object of desire" which has been washed away by the Nepenthe (the first wave), and the wolf tracks as the image of desire (the Shape all light) which is eventually washed away by the second wave of the chariot.¹⁵⁸ For obvious reasons, I find Quint's explanation to be the most helpful, emphasising as it does the role of desire in the poem. It is the prime motivation of the wolf, who thus becomes a symbol for the deepening desires of Rousseau. The main object of his desire is the Shape all light, who is, however, waning from sight (as evidenced in the ensuing lines) so that only her trace is perceived, and then finally only a memory of that trace. The first wave is therefore the cup of Nepenthe, and the second wave is the chariot. These two waves are of the same 'sea'; they follow in rapid

¹⁵⁷ Yeats, p.90.

¹⁵⁸ Quint, p.652.

succession and the second completes what the first began. Rousseau's own predatory desire is finally subsumed into the greater power of the Life movement, just as the wolf's tracks will be washed away by the second wave.

A long description of the Shape's fading follows in lines 412-433. In lines 412-415 the Shape is compared to the morning star, fading slowly in the growing sunrise. Rousseau sees this action as a removal of layers - "'veil by veil the silent splendour drops / From Lucifer'". This sense of veils of light being lifted or pulled away has recurred several times in "The Triumph of Life". At line 32, the speaker's vision is compared to "a veil of light... drawn / O'er evening hills". Rousseau refers to a "gentle trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun" at line 337, and even "the mask of darkness" at line 14 suggests this. All underline the Shelleyan perception of existence as layered reality and dream - here, very beautiful, but later also recognised as ugly (11.535-536). Once again, morality is irrelevant, as this is simply the way Life is.¹⁵⁹

Lucifer, Reiman explains, is the Light-Bearer, the morning star which Shelley usually identified as Venus, the "fairest planet" (1.416). As such, the star is an appropriate image for the object of Rousseau's desire, the Shape all light. In lines 417-423, Rousseau muses about Lucifer - how one senses its benign presence, even though it cannot be seen, as the guardian of the beginning and the end of day. He compares the invisible presence of the star, and

¹⁵⁹ The obvious Shelleyan commentary on this idea is his well-known sonnet, "Lift not the painted veil which those who live / Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there..." (Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.312). This sonnet in its entirety uses many of the images that later occur in "The Triumph of Life" - as in the reference to "shapes" above - and indeed coincides in import and tone with the later poem.

implicitly the Shape all light, to three different images. It is like the jonquil's scent, when fanned by evening breezes; it is the song of a Brescian shepherd; it is the caress that lays the same shepherd content to sleep. Because each experience is not actually seen happening, the emphasis is on senses other than sight - smell, sound and touch. When the 'reality' becomes invisible or dream-like - unable to be known - one must use all one's faulty senses to try to apprehend it. But as the poem goes on to say, such apprehension is finally impossible: "a light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam /... / Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost" (ll.429-431). Rousseau believes that the Shape is present and moves with him as he wanders through the daylight-filled wilderness, but that presence is dimmer than a "day-appearing dream / The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep" (ll.427-428).¹⁶⁰ This latter idea of a day-dream being the shadow of a night-dream further serves to confuse, or rather, meld together notions of reality, dream and sleep. The day-dream, appearing in reality or consciousness, is only a "ghost" of the 'real' reality, the dreams of sleep.¹⁶¹

Rousseau's awareness of the nature of existence into which he has awakened is indicated in his repetition of a phrase he has used earlier (at 1.334). "'The sick day in which we wake to weep'" (1.430) marks Rousseau's comprehension of the grim aspects of Life in the "day". And it is this description of

¹⁶⁰ Rousseau twice calls the now-faded Shape a "ghost" (ll.428 and 433); the implication is that she is effectively dead to him.

¹⁶¹ Note the echoes here of the speaker's "waking dream" at the start of the poem, within which Rousseau and this day-appearing dream occur. Clearly the similar experience is meant to be noticed, but what also becomes evident is the problematic nature of reality - which dream is 'realer'?

existence under the aegis of the chariot of Life that sweeps the poem on to its abruptly curtailed end.

VI (ll.434-547)

The "new Vision" of the chariot of Life sweeps into Rousseau's experience and its negative power is immediately evident in the vocabulary used to describe its effect. It is a "cold bright car" accompanied by "savage...stunning music" and splendour that is like a "tempest" (ll.434-444). The full image of the classical triumph march is here exploited: the chariot is greeted by the loud multitude as if it were returning victorious from "some dread war". It is overhung with "a moving arch of victory" (ll.436-440) which Iris has erected over the car - a further link with the Shape all light, which was also accompanied by Iris' rainbow (l.357).

It is interesting to note that Rousseau's description of the chariot is somewhat more admiring than the speaker's at the opening of his waking dream, and this fact again emphasises the different attitudes of the two men. Where the speaker was loath to welcome the rising sun, and then reacted negatively to the following chariot of Life, Rousseau rather welcomed the rising sun and its herald, the Shape all light, and now is similarly affected by the arrival of the chariot. One must be careful not to over-emphasise this positive attitude, though. Rousseau's reaction to the chariot is more one of awe than of delight, but the language he uses is, nevertheless, in definite contrast to that of the speaker.

'A moving arch of victory the vermilion

And green and azure plumes of Iris had
 Built high over her wind-winged pavilion,
 And underneath aetherial glory clad
 The wilderness... ' (ll. 439-443)

Nevertheless, the light of the chariot - an all-encompassing beam - has, to Rousseau, a sinister aspect. It "forbade / Shadow to fall from leaf or stone; - the crew / Seemed in that light like atomies that dance / Within a sunbeam" (ll. 444-447). The light is absolute dictator; it 'forbids' shadows to exist under its aegis, and there is no escape from it. The multitude are caught in it like specks of dust in a sunbeam, dancing briefly in glory within the circumscribed limits. The image is superb, and creates a vivid mental picture of the crowd of individuals trapped in the chariot's glare.

It is the reaction of those individuals that now becomes the focus of the poem - a focus that is directed more and more at the watching, listening speaker, who is gathering information in order to make a decision of will and worth. How have others dealt with Life's corrupting glare?

Some "played, / Forgetful of the chariot's swift advance" (l. 450). Oblivious preoccupation of the sort that Rousseau indulged in before his draught of Nepenthe is one possible course. These people play upon the "embroidery of flowers that did enhance / The grassy vesture of the desert" (ll. 448-449) - like those who delay in Keats' "Chamber of Maiden-Thought", they are "intoxicated with the light and atmosphere, and... see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there forever in delight."¹⁶² This blindness to the chariot and its inevitable corruption is tantamount to wilful suicide.

¹⁶² Romantic Poetry and Prose, p. 776.

"Others stood gazing till within the shade / Of the great mountain its light left them dim" (ll.451-452). This is passivity, standing on the edge of the action. It is a gentle resignation of power to the chariot, without the spectacular and futile action of others who try to outspeed the chariot, or circle around it, or follow it. These non-actors show a complete lack of will - they have not even the human condition of desire. They are left "dim" and shadowy, non-beings.¹⁶³

Rousseau describes those circling around the chariot as "Clouds that swim / Round the high moon in a bright sea of air" (ll.454-455). Again the association between the chariot and the moon is made. The language shows how Rousseau appears to be revelling in the majestic beauty of the scene - even the following captives have an "exulting hymn" (l.456). The end result, however, is inescapable:

'But all like bubbles on an eddying flood
Fell into the same track at last and were
Borne onward.' (ll.458-460)

This final image makes a devastating comment on the possibility of decisive action when faced with the chariot. All are finally swept into the tide of its force, no matter how they choose to respond to its onslaught. It is at this point that I believe Shelley's poem begins to take on a wholly sceptical outlook. Up until now the hope for possible action has been implicit. While it is true that all are finally initiated into the fullness of Life and must enter the Symbolic stage, going down one of Keats'

¹⁶³ There is a hint that Rousseau is at present one of these - and perhaps the speaker as well. If so, then the urgency to make a decisive act of will becomes even more pressing.

dark corridors, hitherto the possibility that one retains a vestige of will and individual choice to act in a way that will somehow be a positive force for humankind has been central, particularly as a challenge to the speaker. From now on, however, Shelley's faith in this hope is attenuated to the point that it takes on the nature of despair, and he must eventually leave the poem, horrified at the direction it is moving in.

Returning to the image of the bubbles on an eddying flood, one notices the links between this and earlier images. At line 53, the speaker describes the multitude as mixed in "one mighty torrent", and later it is compared to Rome's "living sea" that "poured forth" to meet the triumph (ll.113-114). At line 163, the wild dancers that are run over by the chariot become untraceable, like "foam after the Ocean's wrath / Is spent upon the desert shore." This, of course, prepares us for the Labadorean desert image, in which the deer and wolf tracks are erased by bursting waves. Shelley in this poem has constructed a completely consistent set of images: the fire motif indicates the spark of human will and endeavour, and conversely the flooding sea motif, inevitably associated with the chariot and its effects, indicates its superior power that can extinguish the fire of the individual spirit.¹⁶⁴ Here, at lines 458-460, the individuals become little bubbles of air, or life, swept away by the eddying flood of Life.

* * * *

What is Rousseau's reaction, then, to the chariot of Life? In lines 460-468 he tells us that he is immediately and voluntarily included in the

¹⁶⁴ We can think of the Shape all light as an extension of this imagery. She walks on a rivulet sourced in a bubbling fountain, and she offers a "chrystal [sic] glass / Mantling with bright Nepenthe" (ll.358-359).

multitude that is swept away by Life. The tone of his 'confession' is problematic, though: is he proud of his immediate action in joining the multitude, or is this a self-despising confession of foolhardiness?

'... - I among the multitude
 Was swept; me sweetest flowers delayed not
 long,
 Me not the shadow nor the solitude,
 Me not the falling stream's Lethean song,
 Me, not the phantom of that early form
 Which moved upon its motion, - but among
 The thickest billows of the living storm
 I plunged...'

Rousseau is saying that, unlike the individuals he has just described, he did not preoccupy himself with the beautiful surroundings and ignore the menacing chariot; nor did he passively watch it in shadow and solitude. He is not held back by the sound of the stream or the 'phantom' of the Shape all light - both reminders of the childlike Imaginary state he has just left. Rather, he plunges (and the active verb is crucial) into the thickest part of the human storm before him - his desire is to be utterly immersed in the triumph of Life.

The syntax of these lines is notable: there is a constant, almost strained emphasis on Rousseau's self. "I... me... Me... Me... Me... I..." As we observed earlier, Rousseau's philosophy of self-absorption leads almost invariably to an egotism in which his faith in his own instinctive responses is always paramount. It is the ego-centric nature of these lines that raises the problem of tone (and, by extension, the interpretation of Rousseau as a character): they seem to suggest that Rousseau is proud of his decision in response to the chariot.

Perhaps, though, a more subtle reading is called for. Rousseau knows that in responding in this way, he is remaining true to himself and his philosophy, flawed and misled though it may be. At any rate, he is strong and wilful enough to take decisive action, despite the fact that it finally cripples him.¹⁶⁵

And 'crippling' is an apposite term: the cold light of the chariot "too soon" begins to "deform" his bared breast (ll.467-468). This leads Rousseau into recounting the effect that the chariot's light has in producing the 'simulacra' phantoms that finally deform the rest of the multitude around him. It is on this subject of the chariot's eventual effects on humankind that Rousseau finishes his long account and the speaker poses his unanswerable question. Before describing these phantoms, however, Rousseau makes a rather curious reference to Dante, saying that the "wonder" that he is about to relate (the phantoms), is worthy of Dante's rhymes. He does not actually name Dante, instead alluding to

'...him who from the lowest depths of Hell
Through every Paradise and through all
glory
Love led serene, and who returned to tell
In words of hate and awe the wondrous
story'

¹⁶⁵ This compares with his statement at lines 274-295, in which Rousseau acknowledges the 'fatal flaw' in his philosophy ("And so my words were seeds of misery - / Even as the deeds of others"), and yet can still pride himself on the essentially self-asserting, positive nature of that philosophy ("I / Am one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony"). The possibility of this attitude being an antidote to the speaker's growing scepticism in the poem still raises difficulties, however. Although Rousseau 'goes down fighting', he is nevertheless defeated. Is the speaker's choice, then, between resignation to defeat, and a futile, though self-asserting, struggle against defeat?

How all things are transfigured, except
Love...'

(11.472-476)

Obviously Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso are indicated here, and Love is the guiding figure of Beatrice who remains constant throughout the Commedia. Why, though, does Shelley make this reference to Dante? Is this an overt acknowledgement of his main source, in case we hadn't noticed the Dantean echoes already? Or is it, as some commentators believe, an indication that Shelley's final intentions in this poem are positive - to affirm that Love does remain supreme despite the transfiguring (under Life's corrupting light) of all else?¹⁶⁶ Indeed, these lines become a lynch-pin in the argument for a positive reading, because they are the most overtly optimistic lines in a poem with only a handful of extremely fragile positive references. Merle Rubin goes into this in some detail, pointing to Shelley's interest in transformation as indicating that "wonder" is meant to be read ironically - transformation need not be beautiful. She concludes:

Perhaps the horrific wonders conceal a
true wonder yet to come, the exemption
of Love from the triumph of Life.

¹⁶⁶ Reiman in particular follows this line, emphasising that all Shelley's main literary sources for this poem depict Love triumphing over adversity: Petrarch's Trionfi, Dante's Commedia, Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse and Milton's Paradise Lost (Reiman, pp.78-79). My response to this is that, as we have seen, Shelley's use of these sources has been to subvert them, to sadly parody their positive faith. The very point of this poem is to show how Life kills such faith. Miriam Allott notes that "[Shelley] works with remarkable individuality within his chosen genre, forcing its disciplines to command a vision which is totally at variance with the basic assumptions of his major antecedents" (Allott, p.253).

Yet while this reference to Dante may indicate such an intention on Shelley's part, taken as the sole evidence it alone is not sufficient proof. After all, it is possible that the allusion is meant only as a piece of irony, a way of contrasting Dante's growing faith with Shelley's own despair.¹⁶⁷

I think that one must be careful about using the term 'irony' here: it seems to me that the tone is more elegiac than ironic, though a Shelleyan contrast or 'rewriting' may certainly be intended. The crucial lines in interpreting this reference to Dante are ll.477-479. Rousseau has just finished describing Dante's lifework, as cited above, and he now goes on to say:

'For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes
 hoary
The world can hear not the sweet notes
 that move
The sphere whose light is melody to
 lovers...'

Immediately the consistent imagery of "The Triumph of Life" is recalled, and makes these lines accessible. The point is that Dante's message of idealism is lost to the world, which is as a sea made turbulent (white with choppy waves) by the wrath of a tempest. These images are closely aligned with the chariot of Life, which becomes a sea that overwhelms individuals and absorbs them into itself. The world of Life is turbulent with wrath and is therefore deafened to the possibilities of the Ideal, of true beauty, love and

¹⁶⁷ Allott, p.360.

a positive existence. It cannot hear the sweet notes (recalling the medieval 'music of the spheres') of Venus, the morning star, because of its faulty, corrupted senses. The morning star has been the image of the Shape all light at lines 412-432, a fading image of past beauty that "Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost." It is part of a reality of dream that is lost to this existence - and the same is true of Dante's idealism. Shelley does not debate whether or not such an ideal actually exists; to all intents and purposes it does not, because it is forever lost to humanity.¹⁶⁸

The literary context for Rousseau's extraordinary description of phantoms 'peopling' the world has been traced to Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, Book IV. Paul Turner has shown how Lucretius depicted the ideas and superstitions of humanity as simulacra that detach from individuals and assume a separate phantom-like existence.¹⁶⁹ This depiction has been used at length in many literary modes, particularly classical epic, although for different effects.

What Rousseau actually relates is this. Before the chariot of Life has left the grove in the valley between the mountains and climbed the opposite slope, the grove is suddenly filled with flitting shadows, like vampire bats who can darken the harsh glare of a tropic sun by blocking it out with their prolificity. These shadows correspond to all the people in the valley - the captives, the various elements of the multitude, the watchers - and they torment and parody those people.

Rousseau's vocabulary in narrating this

¹⁶⁸ Moreover, the knowledge of what is lost makes the loss even more profound. One does not miss what one never had (or never knew one had).

¹⁶⁹ Paul Turner, "Shelley and Lucretius," *RES*, NS 10 (August, 1959), 269-282.

extraordinary situation is telling. The simulacra themselves are described as "shadows" or "phantoms",¹⁷⁰ and yet they have a life of their own in that they "peopled" the air with "dim forms" (ll.481-483). Rousseau compares them to vampire bats, and indeed the shadows are predatory creatures, sapping the energy and life from their victims, all under the brilliant, harsh glare of the chariot.

In the ensuing narrative of the shadows' actions, one notices a subtle reiteration of the speaker's description of the multitude and captives from earlier in the poem - a reiteration that emphasises the fact that both men have viewed essentially the same experience. Some shadows fly off into the white blaze of light like "eaglets on the wing" (l.489), recalling the "sacred few" who fled like eagles back "to their native noon" (l.131). It seems that even these apparently uncorrupted individuals produce phantoms of ideas and worries. Other shadows dance "upon the sunny streams and grassy shelves" (l.492) - are these the dancing young who go before the chariot "fleet as shadows on the green" (l.139)? Others "sate chattering like restless apes / On vulgar paws and voluble like fire" (ll.493-494). This marvellous picture is less easily fixed into the speaker's description, but it is nevertheless superb in evoking the character of the shadows. The description is utterly demeaning, reducing this copy of human nature to the chattering of monkeys - animalistic and inane.

¹⁷⁰ Although Shelley does not use the word himself, the C.O.D. definition of 'simulacrum' is an "image of something; shadowy likeness, deceptive substitute, mere pretence" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p.1189). In this poem of shadows, images, and indefinite objects ('Shapes') becoming reality, the fact that these "mere pretences" become so potent and real is not surprising. Indeed, the poem records that some of these shadows gave off shadows themselves (ll.487-488).

Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell springs to mind as illustrating a similar use of the image: "a number of monkeys, baboons & all of that species chain'd by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another"¹⁷¹ - only in Blake the apes are restrained by their chains. Where Blake saw the futile, predatory chattering of theologians and academics as limited and avoidable, Shelley sees that people's minds inevitably produce ideas and superstitions that are inescapable and cruelly predatory.

Other phantoms make their homes in the ermine capes of "kingly mantles" (l.496), or the tiaras of popes, or in the crowns of baby or idiot kings - all recalling the speaker's description of "The Wise / The great, the unforgotten: they who wore / Mitres and helms and crowns" (ll.208-210). The shadows are now described as carrion birds, "vultures" (l.497) making their nests in these victims. They are the offspring of "old anatomies"¹⁷² who have hatched "their bare brood under the shade / Of demon wings." The latter image suggests the classical Furies, who were depicted as haggard, winged creatures of vengeance, preying on the guilty. This rather obscure reference seems to be saying that the "old anatomies" are now dead in body, having been "monarchize[d]" (l.504) or taken over by worms, who turn earth into a charnel house because all humanity is finally consumed by them. But because they are still alive in spirit, the anatomies have managed to reassume power over humanity via their delegates, their hatched brood of phantoms. The mythical banes of classical life, the Furies (products of human minds) are dead in that they are no longer believed in, but their spirit lives on in the

¹⁷¹ Romantic Poetry and Prose, p.43.

¹⁷² The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "anatomy" as a living skeleton, a 'mummy' (op. cit., p.42).

superstitious creations of modern humanity that become objects of fear.¹⁷³

This image is a shocking one, and again we see the way Shelley's mind was working by this point in the poem. In this obscure reference he paints a picture of a life that is debased and entrapped, firstly under the dominion of these terrifying, predatory and yet self-created shadows, and ultimately under the dominion of worms.¹⁷⁴

Rousseau's account of the phantoms continues, again using animalistic imagery. Some shadows are like falcons (another bird of prey), humbly sitting on the fists of "common men" (l.507), and yet the implied threat remains in that these birds also soar, full of freedom and latent power, around the heads of the common men. Other shadows are like clouds of gnats or flies, "thick as mist" around the heads of "lawyer, statesman, priest and theorist" (ll.508-510); disorientating, blinding and maddening. Once more, the speaker's words are recalled: "those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire, / Frederic, and Kant, Catherine, and Leopold, / Chained hoary anarchs, demagogue and sage" (ll.235-237). The final category that Rousseau recounts similarly echoes the lines spoken earlier:

'...others like discoloured flakes of snow
On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair
Fell, and were melted by the youthful glow

¹⁷³ Shelley's attitude to God, discussed earlier, springs to mind here.

¹⁷⁴ This ironically recalls the speaker's description at lines 56 and 57: "And others as with steps towards the tomb / Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath." Those trodden worms have, by a terrible irony, the final word, consuming the physical bodies of treading humanity, who are indeed stepping towards the tomb.

Which they extinguished; for like tears,
they were
A veil to those from whose faint lids they
rained
In drops of sorrow.' (ll.511-516)

This recalls the demise of the young dancers in the van of the chariot, as observed by the speaker. Here, in Rousseau's account, the shadows fall on youthful individuals, and as the shadows are melted by the spark or glow of yet-uncorrupted will, they simultaneously extinguish that spark. This 'melting' resembles a veil of tears descending over a face, marring and blurring the glowing visage. Comparatively, at lines 151-160, the dancing youths kindle invisibly in each other's desire, but as they glow like mingled lightnings they are simultaneously extinguished and "die in rain". There they are ultimately overwhelmed by the chariot; here we see only the first phase of corruption.

The tone in these lines is infinitely sad, an elegy to the lost spark of beauty and will in humanity. Human life is crippled by the anxious superstitions and arbitrary theories of humankind; natural will is thwarted and natural beauty is blighted. Rousseau is haunted by a sense of tragedy and loss: in lines 518-526 he recapitulates the corrupting process he is witnessing, in which the shadows "stain" every form, and cause the "beauty", "the strength and freshness" to wane and fall "like dust". Each person is left "without the grace / Of life", and the distinction between the youthful life of human beauty and will and the corrupt Life of the world of desire is clear here. Rousseau concludes:

'...and in the eyes where once hope shone
Desire like a lioness bereft

Of its last cub, glared ere it died...''

(11.524-526)

This simile could be said to summarise "The Triumph of Life". In every case, hope in an ideal, in beauty, in mankind, is consumed by Life; desire becomes the hallmark of existence, desire for what is now absent and lost. Desperation takes over, as in a mother lion deprived of her last cub. Finally, death ends even this. Rousseau's vision by this stage is utterly bleak.

The deepest tragedy, however, is only just becoming apparent to Rousseau, as he perceives "of whence those forms proceeded" (1.517). The shadows originate from the people themselves:

'...each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves
blown
In Autumn evening from a poplar tree -
Each, like himself and like each other
were,
At first, but soon distorted...''

(11.526-531)

These phantoms preying upon the people in the scene are, paradoxically, produced by these people. Moreover, this creation is a constant process, as each individual continually sends forth simulacra. Here Rousseau uses the famous classical simile of autumn leaves, and it is illuminating in more ways than one. The simulacra are like dead leaves blown from a poplar tree; the tree itself has produced these leaves, but now they are worthless, simply littering the landscape. Each leaf looks like the others in the same way that each simulacrum looks like the others

produced by its creator - though the cast-off simulacra are often distorted into particular shapes by the "air" of the chariot. This phenomenon is compared to "obscure clouds"¹⁷⁵ that form arbitrary and strange shapes according to the prevailing wind and weather patterns (in this case, the chariot's influence).

Secondly, the autumn leaves simile invokes the earlier uses of the same simile and so casts definite lights on Shelley's use of it. Reiman notes that "the simile comparing the dead with fallen leaves had earlier been used by Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton".¹⁷⁶ This is so, but a slight qualification may be added. In these epic references, the dead are more precisely living dead, souls wandering the underworld, able to talk and reminisce and grieve. Physical bodies no longer exist as flesh and blood; only ephemeral souls remain. Similarly, Shelley's phantoms are living dead, which is appropriate as they are the offspring of living-dead skeletons in the "old anatomies". This point has more significance when we apply it to the third aspect of Shelley's use of this simile. It is that this reference is a direct echo from the start of the poem, in which the speaker notes how each member of the multitude "Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky / One of the million leaves of summer's bier" (ll.50-51). As well as indicating again the parallel experience of Rousseau and the speaker, the echo points up a subtle difference. The speaker compared the people of the multitude to autumn leaves, whereas Rousseau used the simile to describe the phantoms. Of course, the difference is ironic, because in reality there is no difference. The

¹⁷⁵ Clouds are insubstantial - as are the phantoms - and yet have very real appearance and effect. Compare this to the commentary on ll.54-64 above.

¹⁷⁶ Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.456.

shadows are simply products of the people; self-creations objectified. Finally they are one and the same - and the speaker also perceived this when he saw in lines 45-65 that the multitude were obsessed with self-created desires and fears. The relevance of the classical echoes in the simile now become obvious: the multitude are, by extension, living-dead, souls surviving in a corrupted body. Life has, for Shelley, become living death - and this brings us back yet again to the central figure in this poem, the Shape in the chariot. It is Life, but as we have seen, it is better titled Death-in-Life.¹⁷⁷ It is this figure, moreover, that Rousseau perceives to be the instigator of the corrupting self-creation of phantoms that is occurring in the people.

'And of this stuff the car's creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were
there
As the sun shapes the clouds...'.

(11.533-535)

The word "creative" is heavily ironic here: while the light of the chariot 'creates' this appalling situation, the creation is in effect a destruction. Life makes human beings produce obsessions, fears, desires and corrupt creeds that turn on their creators, entrap them and kill them.

In lines 535-543 Rousseau summarises the situation to the present. With the chariot's arrival, this falling of masks (*simulacra*) begins, and before the day is old (remember Rousseau's dream began with the rising sun), "the joy which waked like Heaven's glance / The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died."

¹⁷⁷ I believe that the echo from Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner is deliberate, although Coleridge names his figure Life-in-Death.

Rousseau's experience of the Imaginary state, of Keats' Chamber of Maiden-Thought, was all too short-lived. The joy he felt as he 'woke' from oblivion was quickly killed by his darkening awareness, his movement into a Symbolic state and the arrival of the chariot - all relived in the dream. The same experience, he realises, happens to all humanity: all begin as "sleepers in the oblivious valley" (l.539), and all end up corrupted in a living death. Rousseau concludes his terrible narration by explaining what the corrupted multitude do. Some, "weary of the ghastly dance" (l.540), fall by the wayside, as Rousseau himself has fallen. They are the spume or foam "spent upon the desert shore" that the ocean in its wrath has tossed up (see lines 163-164). Typically, those who survive the longest in this world are the most corrupt of humanity - those "least of [the] strength and beauty" (l.543) that characterise the youthful spark. These, of course, give off the most phantoms to plague humanity.

Before leaving Rousseau's account, it is worth commenting briefly on the image of 'falling masks' and how it has changed from its memorable use in Prometheus Unbound. There, the trumpet-blow by the Spirit of the Hour that awakes the world to freedom has the singular effect of loosening masks from the visages of entrapped humanity. The Spirit of the Earth tells how "such foul masks with which ill-thoughts / Hide that fair being whom we spirits call man" are released with the trumpet-blow:

...floating through the air, and fading
still
Into the winds that scattered them; and
those
From whom they past seemed mild and lovely
forms

After some foul disguise had fallen...

(III. iv. 44-45; 67-70)

While the masks are the same in both poems, indicating the self-created fears and desires that imprison and deform humanity, the function of those masks is very different. In Prometheus Unbound the moment of restoration - Shelley's superb apocalypse - sees these masks lifting off and dissolving, leaving a freed and beautiful humanity. The same action occurs in "The Triumph of Life", but here it is a perpetuation of corruption and death. The trumpet-blow of the Spirit of the Hour lifts masks to reveal beauty; the light of Life's triumph lifts masks to kill beauty. Is "The Triumph of Life" a tragic response to Prometheus Unbound? Or is it rather an indication of Shelley's growing disillusionment, in which any kind of apocalypse is postponed indefinitely, and indeed, is doubted as a possibility in this existence? Instead, Life conquers all finally. This apprehension leads to the despairing cry of the speaker - "'Then, what is Life?'" (l.544).

The depths beneath this question are profound, and suggest that several different questions are being asked. Most obviously, the speaker wants to know what the Shape in the chariot, called "Life" by Rousseau, actually is. All he has seen and heard combine to tell him that the Shape is more like Death than Life. So who, or what, is it? How did the Shape get such power? What is the motivating force that makes existence like this? Has it always been this way? Will it always be like this? The speaker's request for clarification leads to these major existential questions.

A further extension of the speaker's question relates to the imperative that has been laid upon him to choose a course of action. It is by now obvious

that the speaker has seen and experienced much of what Rousseau has narrated; he, too, has left the Imaginary state and entered the Symbolic state.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, he, like Rousseau, has already been affected by Life. If this is so, then what options are left open to him? It is too late to escape, like the sacred few, by dying young and uncorrupted. Does he have the strength to somehow resist being utterly corrupted by Life - to be a Socrates or a Christ? The poem implies that it is also too late for that; even the vestige of will that remains like a flickering spark in him is severly threatened by Life's flood of power. Is he to learn from Rousseau, and to make a different, more effective choice, or is his reliving of Rousseau's experience showing that he is foreordained to follow Rousseau's path to corruption? Finally, are his only choices to submit pathetically to the inevitable, or futilely to fight the inevitable? Is this latter choice futile, remembering that Rousseau lit a thousand beacons to guide others? Can this validly be called an effective choice? Or is it more appropriate to talk of degrees of response within a larger category of defeat?

This extended reading of the speaker's question "Then, what is Life?" confronts the terrible dilemma that has been oppressing the speaker throughout the poem. Everything is combining to tell him that decisive action is impossible, or at least, futile, and yet the spark of humanity demands that some such decisive action is undertaken. The situation bears a striking similarity to Shelley's personal sense of a moment of truth at the time of writing "The Triumph of

¹⁷⁸ Presumably this has happened before the poem began, as the speaker's dream is reliving a prior experience, much as Rousseau's dream relives his prior experience. (See p.40 and p.90.) At any rate, the speaker's ability to see Life in all its fullness indicates his matured outlook.

Life". In a much-quoted passage from one of the last letters of his life (to John Gisborne, on June 18, 1822) he writes:

I feel too little certainty of the future, and too little satisfaction with regard to the past, to undertake any subject seriously and deeply. I stand, as it were, upon a precipice, which I have ascended with great, and cannot descend without greater, peril, and I am content if the heaven above me is calm for the passing moment.¹⁷⁹

While he is speaking here ostensibly of his writing, the extract takes on a larger perspective. Already there is a sense of regret about the past, the feeling that he is already corrupted, or exhausted, by Life.¹⁸⁰ There is also a fear of the future, not of what it might do to him, but of his inability to act in it (or the possibility of failing action). There is a sense of a moment of truth and decision, and the correlating feeling that either choice of action will be dangerous or destructive. It all leads to Shelley's deep desire in the last days of his life to halt time, and to remain forever in the present without having to move into a future, or remember a past. Earlier in the same letter he writes: "if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing

¹⁷⁹ Letters, p.404.

¹⁸⁰ See also the letter to Leigh Hunt (April 10, 1822): "Perhaps time has corrected me, and I am become, like those whom I formerly condemned, misanthropical and suspicious." And later in the same letter: "Alas, how I am fallen from the boasted purity in which you knew me once exulting!" (Letters, pp. 369-370.)

moment, "Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful."¹⁸¹ The reference to Faust brings us back to "The Triumph of Life", to the inverted Faustian quotation at the beginning of the poem, which, as we have seen, shows the speaker confronted by a momentous choice. But the speaker, like Faust (and like Shelley?), in exerting his will to choose and act, is simply playing into the hands of a Mephistophelian power vastly greater than himself. So the speaker of the poem delays the decision, instead moving back in time via his waking dream to relive, just as Rousseau's dream relives, his growth through mature, disillusioned awareness of Life to the present point. The delaying must end, though, and the decision must eventually be faced. So we return to his question, which now takes on a further, rhetorical meaning. "Then, what is Life?" is a despairing cry questioning the very purpose of existence. The speaker's choice is a non-choice finally, resulting in futility - what, then, is the meaning or use of existence? At this point the poem reaches its nadir, in a hopeless mood of despair. (Shelley could be writing a commentary on modern life, such is the relevance of his mood to the attitudes of a post-nuclear modern world.) Ultimately, of course, what the speaker is asking for in this question is final knowledge. He needs some sort of absolute, some definite meaning given to Life. But this is impossible, for we are in the valley of perpetual dream. Human existence is simply layered experience, and absolutes such as a fixed reality are denied us.

* * * *

The last lines of the poem are enigmatic to a degree, though some attempts have been made to extract a meaning from them. Matthews has established the text as ending with Rousseau's half-sentence, "'Happy

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.403.

those for whom the fold / Of..." (ll.547-548). If this is a response to the speaker's question it is oblique, to say the least. Rousseau looks at the chariot which, we are told, had now "rolled / Onward" (ll.545-546); clearly he interprets the question to be, at least superficially, asking about the Shape of Life in the chariot. The speaker notes that Rousseau's resumed observation of the chariot has a finality about it, a sense that this look "must be the last" (l.546). Does this mean that Rousseau is about to succumb finally to Life, by dying? Or does it simply mean that the chariot is rolling on, leaving Rousseau in the shadows like the old dancers that the speaker had observed earlier, who are left "Farther behind and deeper in the shade" (l.169). Whichever reading one adopts, the onus is again thrown back onto the speaker. These lines, if ambiguous, do indicate one thing clearly - that time is passing. The car is rolling onward, and Rousseau is losing sight of it. The need for the speaker's decision has become critical.

G.M. Matthews reads the final lines as ironic: "Happy those who, for the sake of a transient happiness, give in to the enemy - the powers that 'Shepherd those herds whom tyranny makes tame'"¹⁸² - the latter being a quotation from Shelley's "Sonnet: Political Greatness", adduced by Matthews in an attempt to explain the "fold" reference. Reiman, on the other hand, goes to some lengths to show that, in his later poetry, Shelley was using "the Christian metaphor of the sheepfold as a symbol of human salvation, usually using in conjunction the symbol of Venus as Hesperus, the evening star, which, appearing when the shepherd led his sheep to the fold at the end

¹⁸² Matthews, p.134.

of the day, Milton had called the 'folding-star'.¹⁸³ He can then suggest that Rousseau's partial declaration might have continued with an affirmative use of "fold", to indicate a possible refuge under Venus. I find this somewhat speculative, particularly as the folding-star, Venus, has been associated with the Shape all light, who is a forerunner to the Shape of Life in the chariot. Reiman, however, is determined to find positives in this poem: immediately following this discussion on the 'folding-star' he makes the claim that "Everywhere in 'The Triumph' the dark side of human experience is balanced by positive alternatives."¹⁸⁴ Clearly I would dispute this.

Merle Rubin is another of the few commentators who attempts to interpret these final lines. She believes Rousseau is reminiscing, desiring to return to the time when the 'folding-star' Venus, in the form of the Shape all light, was central to his existence: "he wishes, in short, to go backwards, to be pastorally re-enfolded."¹⁸⁵ I think this is the most helpful reading of Rousseau's cryptic statement, as it suggests an earlier observation I have made on the reason for Rousseau's dream. Then¹⁸⁶ I suggested that Rousseau locks himself into a circular existence of reminiscence: his only answer to Life is to dream of the time before he became aware of Life, the sensual, egocentric consciousness with the Shape all light. The difficulty is that this memory inevitably leads to his awakening to Life, and so he finds himself as the root on the hill, utterly corrupted by Life. To

¹⁸³ Reiman, p.83.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p.84.

¹⁸⁵ Rubin, p.367.

¹⁸⁶ Footnote number 138, above.

escape, he returns to musing and dreaming on "'those for whom the fold / Of'" the morning star is still central to existence, who can still apprehend Venus/the Shape all light, and who have yet to perceive the debasement that is Life.

Finally, this also leads us to the speaker's entire experience of the poem. It is established early in the poem that the speaker's dream as he lies on the hill is a déjà vu experience, something he has witnessed before. The same is true of Rousseau's dream: Rousseau has seen all this already. This comparison provokes the inevitable surmise: will the speaker also lock himself into a Rousseauistic cycle of evasion? Will he say to the passing moment: "'Remain, thou'"¹⁸⁷ as a way to escape the hopeless future? In a way, this evasion is one kind of decision for the speaker, one that tempts him as it did Shelley. But it is a decision not to act, not to be responsible as a possible aid or example to the individuals around one. That this was Shelley's greatest temptation in the last months of his life is evident from his letters, dating from the time of his request to Trelawny for Prussic acid, so as to hold "that golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest",¹⁸⁸ to his final great letter to Horace Smith:

Let us see the truth, whatever that may be. The destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded that he was born only to die -

and if such should be the case, delusions, especially the gross and preposterous ones of the existing religion, can scarcely be

¹⁸⁷ Letters, p.403.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.405.

supposed to exalt it...¹⁸⁹

The hope that human beings are worth more than they appear to be is overshadowed in these lines by the profound fear that they are not. Nevertheless, Shelley's anger over the way we compound our situation through "delusions" - and one thinks of the simulacra in "The Triumph of Life" - suggests that this is something one can alert fellow human beings to, so as to improve their lot. After a discussion of the socio-political state of England, though, Shelley continues:

I once thought to study these affairs, and write or act in them - I am glad that my good genius said refrain - I see little public virtue, and I foresee that the contest will be one of blood and gold...¹⁹⁰

Shelley no longer desires to continue lighting beacons; he sees the final futility of it. In the end, then, "The Triumph of Life" becomes a site for Shelley's terrible personal dilemma - that of a deeply concerned, socially responsible individual who perceives that social action is ultimately useless. I believe that his apprehension of this impasse in this poem brought Shelley to an abrupt halt, and that the only solution to his problem - death - ironically intervened.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p.410. The underlining is mine.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ I do not believe, as does James Rieger, that Shelley's death suggests suicide.

CONCLUSIONS

What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will, and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain it is to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much. For what are we? Whence do we come, and whither do we go? Is birth the commencement, is death the conclusion of our being? What is birth and death?¹⁹²

The questions posed in this extract from the brief and fragmentary essay "On Life" lead Shelley to conclude that there is a force or sense in mankind that resists "nothingness and dissolution (change and extinction)" (p.476), but we do not acknowledge that force, except when we are very young. As we grow up, we lose this apprehension of the life within us as we are overcome by the products of our own minds - the philosophies of cause and effect, religion or habit. Shelley writes in this essay of the tyranny of signs, particularly words, which stand "not for themselves but for others, in their capacity of suggesting one

¹⁹² From the essay "On Life", in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, p.475.

thought, which shall lead to a train of thoughts. - Our whole life", he concludes "is thus an education of error." (p.477).

This whole situation is what Shelley depicts poetically in "The Triumph of Life". The 'life' in humanity - that 'spark' that resists extinction¹⁹³ - is nevertheless overwhelmed by Life itself, the process of desire and self-created oppression that is living. Rousseau's dream illustrates the loss of memory and apprehension of life. The questions asked in the extract almost copy the questions asked by the speaker and Rousseau. And the sense of final ignorance about the nature of life is evident both in the extract and the poem. All that can become evident is "our ignorance to ourselves" - of the central limitations of mortality that prevent us from discovering the source and perpetuation of that 'spark'. Again, Lacanian theory becomes a useful gloss for Shelley's ideas here. As paraphrased by Alan Sinfield, Lacan sees human development as the loss of perceived unity in childhood because of the entry into language.

Initially the infant experiences a sense of wholeness and harmony which it derives from the security of the relationship with the mother. The entrance into language and identity is founded in the loss of this imaginary wholeness: the belief that there must be a point of harmony and certainty persists, but attempts to locate it inevitably incorporate the split which

¹⁹³ This 'spark' imagery is prevalent in the poem, as we have seen. It is also called 'life', as distinct from 'Life', at line 523, thus preserving the separation that Shelley makes in the essay between Life and "the apprehension of life".

they would heal.¹⁹⁴

Shelley also describes the nature of the spark of human life to be unity ("On Life", p.477). It is destroyed by the language-created philosophical systems of thought - Rousseau's "phantoms". The constructive power of language over our existence is a central theme of the essay "On Life", and one can see how Shelley's interest in this leads to the stimulating post-structuralist responses to "The Triumph", as examined in the critical history. But this is an area already well-explored by others, and beyond the scope of this thesis. It does, however, reveal Shelley to be a major forerunner of the modern theories on language, semiotics and psychoanalysis.

What the essay "On Life" also shows is the progression in Shelley's thinking over the years of his life. Too many critics talk of "The Triumph" as Shelley's retraction or palinode, or else a reaffirmation. Shelley did not suddenly reject his idealism for a bleak scepticism. Rather, his faith underwent a slow attenuation, while his scepticism correspondingly increased. The essay "On Life", written in 1819, thus conveys the faith in the attainable ideal (as seen in Prometheus Unbound, also finished in 1819), but it also prefigures the hopelessness of "The Triumph" of 1822. To describe the situation in a different way: for Shelley hope and despair were not fixed, opposite poles, but were part of a merging dialectic, in which distant hope sounds remarkably like despair.

* * * *

What I have attempted to do in my examination of "The Triumph of Life" is to use the poem's own referents as my guide, particularly in approaching an

¹⁹⁴ Sinfield, p.67.

understanding of Shelley's myriad images. Sometimes Shelley's biography has provided extra illumination on the poem, and I have quite happily included this, remembering William Keach's statement that "this is not a matter of apologetic reverence for 'biographical criticism'...but rather of allowing one's primary concern with the work and play of language in the text to remain open to whatever context the text itself makes pertinent."¹⁹⁵

Finally, it may be said that I have, in this thesis, tried to 'have my cake and eat it too', by arguing that Shelley presents an unknowable poem, and yet then attempting to outline a way by which to 'know' the poem, a reading. I would respond by pointing out that life as Shelley depicts it in this poem is all about attempts to 'know' or explain the unknowable, and that my comments, like the speaker's and Rousseau's questions, are simply attempts to cope with the text of this 'Life'.

¹⁹⁵ Keach, p.202.

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