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ABSTRACT

BARRY MAGARIAN

INDETERMINACY IN SOME OF SHELLEY'S MAJOR POEMS: A
CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Ph.D.

1993

This thesis examines a selection of Shelley's major poems in order to delineate the way they invite and resist interpretation. I argue that Shelley's reluctance to supply simplistic meanings is bound up with his search for truth and symptomatic of intellectual honesty. Shelley's texts call upon the reader's responses in order to bring their meanings into focus. These meanings are dynamically provisional. This method of calling upon the reader's responses is specific to Shelley and is termed 'indeterminacy'. The term is not used primarily in a deconstructive sense. 'Indeterminacy' incorporates the indeterminacy in a text, and the indeterminacy of the reader's response that is triggered by the text.

The thesis has six chapters. Chapter One addresses *Alastor*, relating the indeterminacy with which the Poet is presented to the poem's problematic narrative methods. Chapter Two examines the enigma of the Maniac in *Julian and Maddalo*. The Maniac's soliloquy remains poised between illumination and opacity. This ambivalence is linked to Julian's function and the inconclusive ending. Chapter Three examines *The Cenci* in the light of Shelley's tendency to let the reader assume the protagonist's viewpoint. I argue that, in evaluating Beatrice, we must also evaluate ourselves. Chapter Four examines self-consciousness and bereavement in *Adonais*. Chapter Five concerns the lyrics to Jane Williams, concentrating on the changing psychological currents of Shelley's relationship with Jane. The relationship is examined in terms of the tension between poetic symbols and complex human personalities. Chapter Six concerns Rousseau's ambiguity in *The Triumph of Life*; this is related to the enigma of human endeavours and the articulation of moral dilemmas that are left unresolved. Throughout I illustrate Shelley's sense of poetry as surrogate-like in that he is continually striving to recreate the absent forms and sensations of experience and often anxious to stress the reductiveness of this attempt.

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CRITICAL DISCUSSION**

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Ph.D.

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

1993

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- 7 JUN 1994

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father with love and gratitude.

Declaration

No part of the material offered in this thesis has previously been submitted by me for a degree in this or any other university.

Statement of Copyright

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Acknowledgements

The writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the advice, guidance and support of my tutors Dr. Michael O'Neill and Dr. Pamela Clemit. I should like to thank them both very much. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my parents for their patience and great generosity.

There are also a whole host of friends who have, at one time or another, been there when I needed them, urged me to complete this thesis and insisted on how bad I would feel if I didn't. In particular, I would like to thank Dougal Wilson for his detachment and practical approach, John Hutchinson for his *joie de vivre*, Serge Suanez for the harmony, Kathleen Koch for her voice, Karen Kassulat for not letting me get things out of proportion, Barrie Hall for his mixture of surrealism and sanity, Daniel Stocks for not letting me get things in proportion, Nicholoas Antoniu for showing me how to wordprocess with style, Grant Gordon because he is a great listener and an antidote to excess, Andy Calder for his American accents, Ian Gordon for his ironic self-effacement, John Metson because he's going through the same thing, Wilf Moss because he's suffused with warmth and has terrible taste in clothes, Bernie Zanzmer because he understood, Tom Smith for his erroneous grasp of Shakespeare and the way this grasp paid rich dividends in performance, Nicola Wearmouth for helping me get off the merry go-round, Adam Batstone for his sense of the absurd, Louise Brown because she laughed at my jokes, Jenny Reid because she liked big sticky puddings, Debbie Pratley because she had a manner beyond courtesy, Mike Creamer because he was always in a good mood, and finally Stefan Wesiak because he believed in me.

Note on Texts

Quotations from and references to Shelley's poetry and prose are taken from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, A Norton Critical Edition, (eds.) Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: Norton, 1977). Exceptions to this are quotations from 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient' and 'When the Lamp is Shattered' which are taken from *The Lyrics of Shelley* by Judith Chernaik (London: Cleveland, 1972) and quotations from 'To the Moon', *Charles The First*, *The Revolt of Islam*, 'Prince Athanase', *Rosalind and Helen*, 'Song for "Tasso"', 'A Summer Evening Churchyard' and the translations from Goethe's *Faust* which are taken from Shelley's *Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, (ed.) Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Abbreviations

- Byron *Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, (ed.) Frederick Page, a new edition corr. by John Jump (3rd. edition; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- Coleridge *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, The Oxford Authors, (ed.) H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- Cronin Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1981).
- DC Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).
- EOS *Essays on Shelley*, (ed.) Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982).
- Julian *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, The Julian Edition, (ed.) Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (first pub. 1926-30; London: Ernest Benn, 1965).
- Keats *The Complete Poems*, (ed.) John Barnard (London: Penguin Books, 1973).
- KSR *Keats-Shelley Review*.
- Letters *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, (ed.) Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).
- MLN *Modern Language Notes*.
- NS *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views*, (ed.) G. Kim Blank (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1991).
- O'Neill *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

- PMLA* Publications of the Modern Language Association.
- PP* *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, (eds.) Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, A Norton Critical Edition (London and New York: Norton, 1977).
- PW* Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, (ed.) Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- SIR* *Studies in Romanticism*.
- Sperry Stuart M. Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Harvard and Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1988).
- Wasserman Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1971).
- Wordsworth *Poetical Works*, Oxford Standard Authors, (ed.) Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1916).

Introduction

In this thesis I argue that Shelley is a poet whose greatness is bound up with his reluctance to supply his works with simplified meanings. I examine a selection of poems that are all characterised by the intensity and vividness with which they recreate experience, an intensity and vividness which often gives rise to ambiguity and open-endedness. The works both suggest and withhold the possibility of definitive interpretation. Often the reader realises that elucidation cannot be derived from the text alone and must also be sought in his own responses. This method of calling upon the reader's responses leads to the recognition of indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is a response within the reader that is triggered by something within the text; it is the interaction between the two, not merely one or the other. Indeterminacy is present in and a product of Shelley's texts by virtue of the way in which they employ language. Only when the reader has been immersed in the poem's situations to a point at which he himself becomes a component part in and extension of them can he fully apprehend the verse's richness and diversity of meaning. The poetry's indeterminacy reflects Shelley's reluctance to supply art with answers that are not forthcoming in life, and can be seen as an embodiment of his intellectual honesty.

My use of the word 'indeterminacy' in this thesis is only indirectly related to a deconstructionist use of the term. In general whenever the word crops up it should be referred to the argument just outlined, though this argument is developed, modified and refined elsewhere in the thesis. The definitions of 'indeterminacy' provided in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* clarify my use of the term:

(1) in reader-response criticism, any element of a text that requires the reader to decide on its meaning ...

(2) in deconstruction, a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning that could bring to an end the play of meanings between the elements of a text ...¹

My reading of Shelley incorporates elements from both definitions; I argue that ultimately the reader must decide for himself on any given meaning, as in the first definition, but I only utilise the deconstructionist 'principle of uncertainty' indirectly as I consider this principle too rigid and systematic. In Shelley this 'play of meanings' is rooted in the poet's realisation that poetry is always at one remove from the arenas in which emotions and meanings lie because it often displays an awareness of its surrogate-like status, even while employing figurations of great sophistication. The poems I examine strain to allow for a multiplicity of meanings to emerge as they attempt to get in touch with the intangible. In *Alastor* (1816), for example, this intangibility lies in the dream-vision's elusive quality and the Poet's search for something he does not fully comprehend. The poetry gains its effects by intimating and suggesting, rather than confirming or refuting. Shelley does not want us to forget that the poem is as much about the artifice of imagination itself as about its workings.

Deconstructionist critics such as Paul de Man do not have a sufficiently developed sense of Shelley's poetic skill. My approach is a modification of New Critical methods, a modification in that I do not isolate the poems from their historical and literary contexts and am not intent on demonstrating the compatibility of form and meaning. In fact I argue that Shelley's poetry often creates its most powerful effects by opposing form with content, tone with meaning, as in, for example, the passage in *The Triumph of Life* (1822) that describes Rousseau's assimilation into 'the clime / of... [the] cold light whose airs too soon deform. -' (467-8) Here the meaning of Rousseau's speech is negative,

but his tone is exultant (see Chapter Six). The immediate effects of Shelley's stylistic techniques are my primary concern but I relate these effects to the wider issue of what the poetry attempts to communicate philosophically and morally. Whereas some critics construct arguments about Shelley *in spite* of his language, I construct arguments *because* of it. Like Richard Cronin I agree that 'there is a tendency, though certainly not a uniform one, for the study of the individual poem to be a means through which the critic's argument is pursued, rather than the end at which the argument arrives.'² My study seeks to offer close readings of the poems, and is in sympathy with a number of recent works on Shelley such as Cronin's *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts*, William Keach's *Shelley's Style*, Stuart Sperry's *Shelley's Major Verse* and Michael O'Neill's *The Human Mind's Imaginings*. Such readings are not, however, divorced from contextual and conceptual issues.

One of Shelley's major preoccupations was the inadequacy of language. His poetry and prose are strewn with comments that bemoan this fact.³ His poetry is profoundly aware of the nature of what Eliot calls 'the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings'.⁴ Many of the poems thrive on articulating a sub-text that, in J. Hillis Miller's words, breaks 'the illusion that language is a transparent medium of meaning'.⁵ The tendency of Shelley's poems to comment on their own texts, in the late lyrics to Jane Williams (1822), for example, is symptomatic of Shelley's concern to alert the reader to poetry's altering veil, altering because it is only called into being *after* the event - in this case, meetings with Jane - and is therefore, unavoidably, extraneous and so detached. Like *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley's last major poem, the lyrics are highly self-conscious.

Hillis Miller, Rajan, and de Man have all written on *The Triumph of Life* (1822), but these critics are more intent on utilising the poem in order to demonstrate theories of language in general than on demonstrating the uniqueness of the workings of its language in particular. As William Keach puts it 'post-structuralist Shelleyans ... have been too little concerned with

distinguishing the elusive activity peculiar to Shelley's writing from the problematic condition of language generally.' ⁶ *The Triumph of Life* seems to have held a special allure for the critic interested in the creation and erasure of centres of meaning - the 'transcendental signified'. Because the poem itself is an unrelenting movement to and from dissolution it is Shelley's most obviously inscrutable and inconclusive text. Its visions multiply and fragment to leave the reader with an enigma no more clearly defined, let alone resolved, by the end of the poem than it was at the start. The opacity that surrounds human endeavours and actions is what this enigma consists of. G. Kim Blank describes how 'Shelley's ideas seem ... to take up the most important issue of post-structuralist theory - the confrontation of language and meaning.' ⁷ *The Triumph of Life* repeatedly demonstrates the inadequacy of the former's ability to communicate the latter. Hillis Miller sees the endless movement of 'disfiguration', to use de Man's word (see his essay in *Deconstruction and Criticism* ⁸) in terms I am in agreement with. He feels that, like the protagonists of the poem, we too are confronted with inconclusive visions, ambivalent symbols and unresolved questions. The very obliteration of the visions simulates, for the reader, the way in which, for example, Rousseau's brain becomes 'as sand'. (405) As Hillis Miller puts it, 'to become a victim of the poem means experiencing the impossibility of ever unravelling all its threads.' ⁹ His essay comes ^{as} close, I think, as possible to the poem's recalcitrance. But Hillis Miller's reading remains too self-enclosed and does not refer to Shelley's other works. In addition, he does not talk about how the poem's very sophistication about reticence is, on one level, an abandonment of reticence.

In a recent article Bernard Beatty talks of the 'interlocking subjectivities of Rousseau, narrator and reader' ¹⁰ in *The Triumph of Life*. The remark is relevant to one of the concerns of my study, in that I seek to address the way in which Shelley's poems involve the reader in their situations by allowing him to apprehend the subjectivities of their characters' perceptions. At certain key

moments reader and protagonist become inseparable in that the development of the latter is facilitated by, and entwined in, the former's response.

In *The Triumph of Life* Shelley is at his most fertile because he is at his most honest. It is the same kind of honesty that prevails at the ending of *Julian and Maddalo* (1819). Here information is withheld not because Shelley is negligent but because it is the most fitting commentary on the way in which the Maniac's soliloquy sparks off issues that cannot be resolved - either within the confines of Julian and Maddalo's theorising or, it is suggested by the truncated nature of the end, within the confines of poetry itself. The soliloquy illustrates both the need to interpret and the futility of doing so. We have to fill in the gaps ourselves because Shelley cannot, or will not, do it for us.

Jerrold Hogle's study *Shelley's Process* is rooted in deconstruction's obsession with the transcendental signified. Unlike, de Man, for example, Hogle relates Shelley's methods to a sense of the creatively malleable. His main argument is that Shelley's poems thrive on their resistance to an absolute centre of meaning and proceed by continually revising themes and meanings. This procedure is termed 'transference' and is applied extensively to embrace Shelley's work at an ideological, philosophical and verbal level. Transference is incorporated within a style that is characterised by 'verbal figures [that] are continually dissolving and thus questioning their structures before any one of them has a chance to seem complete.'¹¹ Transference gives Shelley the means with which to '[explode] ... the most established, conventional thought-relations into interconnections with others ... rarely thought to be analogous before.'¹² Hogle's notions are admirable and the rigour with which he develops them is exemplary but, like Michael O'Neill, I feel that 'the very insistence with which he opposes the pursuit of absolute centres ... can centre his own readings too rigidly.'¹³ Hogle's all-embracing theory is vulnerable to the charge that it is reductive; as with Earl Wasserman's monumental study *Shelley: A Critical Reading* too little attention is paid to the imaginative impact of Shelley's actual words. Paul Hamilton's

criticism is one that I find myself in accord with: 'Hogle ... presents Shelley as battling entirely on the conceptual level. Shelley's poems generally remain in half-knowledge of Hogle's theory about them and it is clear that he believes that a fuller such knowledge is all they aspire to.' ¹⁴

Earl Wasserman's readings are less fixated on a central notion but he too is anxious to fit the poetry into a framework of metaphysical coherence. I am in debt to him for the vividness with which he delineates Shelley's search for truth and relates it to his examination of opposing and related impulses such as scepticism and idealism, myth and reality. As Wasserman puts it, 'the radical indeterminacy of poems like *Alastor, Julian and Maddalo*, and the hymns of Pan and Apollo ... is his frank admission that [Shelley] ... has no assured basis on which to arrive at truth'. ¹⁵But Wasserman can at times be too ready to ignore the way meanings are held in suspension in Shelley's poetry. For example, in his discussion of *Julian and Maddalo's* ending Wasserman limits the suggestiveness of Shelley's emblems and does not allow for other implications and possibilities. Wasserman refers to Maddalo's daughter as 'this *perfect* human being' (my italics) ¹⁶, ignoring the perfunctory nature of her appearance and a provisionality - veiled in enchanted lines (592-3) - that combine to make it possible to say only that she is more tantalizing than perfect.

However, Wasserman eloquently illustrates the nature of the opposition Shelley felt to be at the centre of human behaviour, a fact reflected by the way in which, in Lloyd Abbey's words, he 'was in a state of almost total philosophical uncertainty throughout his career.' ¹⁷

The Shelley I examine in this thesis is not the only Shelley; there is also a plainspeaking Shelley evident in such works as 'Letter to Maria Gisborne' (1820) and a propagandist, as in *Queen Mab* (1813) and *The Revolt of Islam* (1817). To my mind all the works that I address suggest Shelley's description of 'high poetry' in the *Defence of Poetry* (1821):

All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed ... after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight. ¹⁸

What makes Shelley relevant to our 'age' is his anxiety about language. A good deal of the recent resurgence of critical interest in Shelley stresses the manner in which he battled with language. The New Critics and Leavis 'were not', as G. Kim Blank puts it, 'ready for a poetry where the play of language is at least as esteemed as the work of signification.' ¹⁹ More obsessively than any other Romantic poet Shelley delineates the obstacles that impede communication, even as he draws attention to his attempt to overcome them.

I leave *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) out of my discussion for a number of reasons. To begin with, I do not have enough space to do it anything like justice. The poem has already been exhaustively scrutinized by, amongst others, Wasserman, Hogle, and Bloom and the scope of these readings was not one that I felt I could emulate. In addition, I have chosen to write on works such as the late lyrics to Jane Williams and *Adonais* (1821) that have in the past been relatively neglected.

At its best *Prometheus Unbound* shares the fluidity of different characters' perspectives, evident in works such as *Alastor*, *Julian and Maddalo*, and *The Triumph of Life*. The perspectives overlap, mingle and draw poetic sustenance from each other. However, with Kelvin Everest, I agree that *Prometheus Unbound* 'remains in some important respects the work of a writer who has slipped out of touch with the sense of an audience.' ²⁰ The subjective element that allows a reader to identify with a situation or character is missing. This in

itself is not a fault but it makes the drama less obviously appealing to me; the works of Shelley that I confine myself to are those whose situations and emotions *can* be identified with by the reader. This identification lets the reader step inside the work in question and so face the same dilemmas and difficulties as the characters and personae of that work. We cannot identify with Prometheus in the way in which we can identify with, say, the Maniac or Beatrice Cenci. Similarly one cannot step inside the abstract universe of the poem as one can in *The Triumph of Life*, another work that has lost touch with the sense of an audience, but for very different reasons. In the case of the latter work Shelley simply does not care what people think anymore; in the case of the lyrical drama, perhaps he cares too much - a fact that suggests itself in the too careful phraseology of the Preface ('My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers, with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence'. ²¹)

The design of *Prometheus Unbound* revolves around the delineation of human potential. There is also a non-didactic element that thrives on the same kind of lyricism at the core of, say, the lyrics to Jane Williams, and the poem is ultimately one of imaginings and intuitions. For example, the famous *doppelgänger* speech from Act I provides an instance of the way Shelley lets words in the poem outsoar their immediate context by displaying self-awareness, a feature of Shelley's poetry that is at the heart of my readings:

- Ere Babylon was dust,
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
For know, there are two worlds of life and death:
One that which thou beholdest, but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit

The shadows of all forms that think and live
Till death unite them and they part no more;
Dreams and the light imaginings of men
And all that faith creates, or love desires,
Terrible, strange, sublime and beautiful shapes.

(I. 191-202)

William Ulmer calls this passage 'a matrix of potentiality'²² and its power lies in the tautness of its visualization of potentiality. The indeterminacy of the passage lies in the way in which it recreates the world 'underneath the grave', while acknowledging that this world is beyond the vistas of realizable experience. The verse begins by announcing a muted grandeur: ' - Ere Babylon was dust, / The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child, / Met his own image walking in the garden.' We oscillate from the impersonal - Babylon - to the intimate - 'my dead child'. The power of the first three lines lies in this juxtaposition. Two lines later another train of thought is introduced and it is not immediately clear what the connection with what has gone before is. The second world of death is the *raison d'être* for the lines and is linked - in its incantatory and intangible quality - to the meeting with the apparition in the garden. In line 196 the 'beyond the grave' motif is developed and the verse flows in one sentence to line 202. Death unites 'the *shadows* of all forms that think and live'. (My italics) This is stated matter-of-factly, death's potential to bring together being taken for granted, the verse feeling no need to prove or illustrate how this comes to be. 'Shadows', in this context, suggests both insubstantiality and the germs of an embryonic animation. Line 200 is, on one level, a description of what the whole passage represents: an imagining that knows that its recreation of reality is also the creating of a poem. Such artifice for Shelley sometimes denotes loss, as in the late lyrics; but here such self-awareness suggests the way in which poetry can encompass everything, as the lyrical drama is attempting to do.

Another passage that I wish to examine occurs at the end of Act III:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed - but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, - the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise - but man:
Passionless? no - yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

(III. iv. 193-204)

The lines reside within an imaginative frame of encapsulation and realisation, as opposed to analysis or exegesis. The language is informed by the sense that poetry can recreate the cosmos. As with the earlier extract we are aware of Shelley at the centre of the poem, knowingly shaping the contours of his vision with both energy and sobriety.

The passage as a whole gives an impression of an almost feverish unveiling of illusions and an accompanying and opposing movement of static deliberation. The two instances of 'but man' impede the flow of the adjectives that precede this phrase: 'Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed' in the first instance; 'just, gentle, wise' in the second. 'Passionless?' is almost insolent in the context of hectic euphoria here. 'Chance and death and mutability' is a set of nouns that follows a chain of sets of adjectives. The nouns tempt us to read them with the abandon that the sets of adjectives invited but we cannot as they ultimately signal an

unalterable obstructiveness. 'Clogs' onomatopoeically seals and echoes this import succinctly. The last two lines are eclipse-like, a time between death and birth, darkness and light. 'Unascended' signals the potential for further achievement and yet suggests what might be present intractability. Finally the last line - a set of three parallel constructions, 'pinnacled dim', 'in the', and 'intense inane' - hinges beautifully. 'Dim' counterparts 'loftiest star' and conveys the unapprehensibility of the star. 'Pinnacled dim' is a powerful oxymoron echoed syllabically by 'intense inane'. But the last phrase does not suggest the opposition contained in the first. Instead these last two words merge together in one movement that creates, with the greatest economy, the largest expanse. It is a hypnotic line and grows out of the speed and tension of what has gone before; the line becomes a summary of the meaning and tone of the whole passage, letting the verse take on board a new level of meaning, one that registers its own workings. The passage's duality, parallel clauses and intricate constructions yield effects that are enriching; they evade simplicity in inviting potentiality and this accounts for such richness.

Prometheus Unbound is the antithesis of a poem like Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805 and 1850) in that the former encapsulates the cosmic while the latter confines itself to the autobiographical. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it '[Wordsworth] ... cannot decide whether he is fit to be a poet on an epic scale. The great longing is there; the great (objective) theme eludes him. Wordsworth cannot find his theme because he already has it: himself.'²³ Romanticism as a movement drew much of its material from the arena of the self, an area opened up by the climate of the time when the individual was becoming more important than the collective - a trend prompted by writers like Rousseau who drew on their own biographies and experiences to explain the condition of society at large. Wordsworth and Coleridge's poetry is openly confessional; Shelley and Byron, on the other hand, are as interested in creating texts derived from myth and authors (Dante and Tasso in Byron's case, Rousseau in Shelley's) as from the self.

For Shelley the figure of the poet in society is also of central importance, as Timothy Clark has demonstrated comprehensively.²⁴ *Adonais*, for example, a pastoral elegy on the death of Keats, reveals the isolation of the poet, his privileged place in society and the way poetry might be a bridge between mortality and eternity. In the poem Shelley comes close to subverting the conventions of the genre and replacing its formal elements with an uncompromising emotional intensity that stands uneasily between the personal and the allegorical. The indeterminacy of the work lies in the way it allows *Adonais*'s entry into a higher realm to be perceived both as an act of escapism and as a consciously meditated means of enlarging spirituality. The poem intimates that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Hartman also talks of the 'Solitary', a figure at the centre of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814). 'It is, ultimately, consciousness that alienates [the Solitary] ... from life and imposes the burden of a self which religion or death or a return to the state of nature might dissolve. Yet their heroism, or else their doom, is not to obtain this release.'²⁵ The Poet of *Alastor* embodies these notions, as do the Maniac of *Julian and Maddalo* and the Rousseau of *The Triumph of Life*. All three ask too much of life, their expectations are in excess of possibilities and they end ravaged by their sensibilities, isolated and solipsistic (*Alastor*), insane (*Julian and Maddalo*) and both literally and metaphorically disfigured (*The Triumph of Life*).

Beatrice Cenci is in some ways a similar figure. She comes to symbolise an ideal of integrity in the face of a comfortless and amoral universe. She too is, in some ways, too pure for the world and yet, Macbeth-like, eventually propagates the very deceit and evil she initially fought against. Shelley's achievement here is the way he allows the reader to identify completely with Beatrice and step inside her mind; he also insists that she is the one character in *The Cenci* (1819) that we most need to be objective about. Our reactions to the events of the play are

taken up in her reactions and because of this judging her means judging ourselves.

In the late lyrics to Jane Williams Shelley himself becomes the solitary, isolated from the natural world he describes and unable to associate with humans. The lyrics insist on the way in which poetry is at best reductive in its attempt to recreate what is absent. The changing psychological currents of his relationship with Jane make for extraordinarily subtle poems, as I hope my reading of them in Chapter Five will bring out. The interplay between the poet and the object of his admiration is indeterminate because Jane embodies both the redemptive possibilities of a symbol and the complex intangibility of a person. The poet realises that a poetic symbol is within his control but a person is beyond it. The tension that arises from this opposition lies at the core of the poems.

The poems that I examine in this thesis all have a similar interplay of different yet related perspectives with the exception of *Adonais*, though here the changing perspectives on death in the poem make for a singularly multi-faceted work. Part of the difficulty of *Alastor* and *Julian and Maddalo* lies in the fact that both have 'only half-reliable narrator[s]' ²⁶, as Jerrold Hogle puts it. Our responses are shaped by those of the narrator who tells the story; in *Alastor* a narrator who paints a picture of the Poet in a manner that draws too readily from his own sensibilities; in *Julian and Maddalo*, a narrator who shares many of the characteristics of the Maniac at the centre of the poem. This overlapping both complicates and enriches, and further allows the works to thrive on a sense of ambiguity of response; the works move between condemnation (for the Narrator, the Poet, Julian) and sympathy (for the Poet, the Maniac). In the case of *The Triumph of Life* the relationship between the narrator and Rousseau is similarly fluid, as each in turn recounts his experiences of visions within the poem. Like Beatrice Cenci who comes to resemble her father, Rousseau suggests what might be the narrator's future.

In general the following chapters begin by placing the work in question within a wider context by relating it to Shelley's life at the time and influences on it. They then proceed to a discussion of textual and conceptual details while bringing in other poets and writers when I consider it useful to do so. Chapter One (*Alastor*) stresses the way identity is changeable and uncertain, a prey to the instabilities that solitude induces. This is related to the way the reader has to unravel the meaning of the Poet's experiences and the relationship he has with the Narrator and the natural landscape. Chapter Two (*Julian and Maddalo*) is concerned with the enigma of the Maniac's text, one that Shelley refuses to gloss himself, implying instead, in the Preface to the poem, that his text will trigger the reader into finding meaning in the poem by referring to the 'text' of his own 'heart'.²⁷ Chapter Three (*The Cenci*) further develops the way Shelley elicits responses from the reader by allowing him to assume the viewpoints of his protagonists and therefore confront dilemmas that might lead to self-knowledge.²⁸ Chapters Four (*Adonais*) and Five (the late lyrics to Jane Williams) develop the notion of Shelley's self-consciousness and how it relates to his attempt to come to terms with life and bereavement (Chapter Four) and the fragility of human relationships (Chapter Five). Chapter Six (*The Triumph of Life*) focuses on the flux and intangibility of experience and again draws attention to the gulf between poetry and meaning. Like Chapters Two and Three, it stresses the sense in which Shelley provides the reader with the same perspective that the protagonists of the poem have.

The ordering of the chapters is chronological and is designed to point up continuities and parallels, between *Alastor* and *Julian and Maddalo* (narrative methods), *The Cenci* and *Julian and Maddalo* (different perspectives), *The Cenci* and *Adonais* (moral ambiguities), *Adonais* and the late lyrics (self-consciousness), and the late lyrics and *The Triumph of Life* (the perception of human relationships). What I hope emerges from this study is the way in which Shelley's poems rouse the faculties of the reader by forcing him into unravelling

their respective threads and meanings. The thesis also attempts to illustrate the way in which Shelley's fondness for difficult and elusive images, obsession with the workings of language, and resistance to simplistic meanings are traits profoundly tied up with his search for truth.

1

Alastor

The Mutability of Identity

Alastor (1816) is the first of Shelley's major poems that actively thrives on its resistance to a definitive interpretation. This open-endedness gives the verse part of its resonance. The poem is indeterminate because it never offers the reader anything approaching a view of the meaning and significance of the Poet who is at its centre. Instead, it invites the making of judgements from the reader that the poem alone will neither wholly endorse nor wholly refute. The poem creates its effects by intimating and suggesting, as opposed to stating. *Alastor* insists on its own reticence with great sophistication and subtlety and this ultimately makes for a work whose richness derives as much from meanings that lie beyond language as from what is stated in it.

The poem offers a portrait of a figure - the Poet - whose ambiguity is inseparable from his meaning. The reader does not have recourse to an objective framework within which the Poet can be placed as our apprehension of him is shaped by the subjectivities of the Narrator's perceptions. Shelley withholds his own judgements and this reticence accounts for the poem's recalcitrance. In a wider sense, *Alastor*, like all the poems that I examine in this thesis, plays on the expectation that the act of writing raises - that we will be offered clearly defined moral and emotional reference points - and the knowledge that to write is not necessarily to practice such deliberation.

At the time of the poem's composition, the early winter of 1815, Shelley had read and immersed himself in Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814). Mary Shelley records this in her journal in an entry marked on 14 September 1814: 'Shelley ... brings home Wordsworth's Excursion of which we read a part'.¹ Richard Holmes's remark on Shelley's state of mind at this time is revealing: '[It

was] as if he had seen through life and all it had to offer.' ² Mary's next comment is indicative of the fact that the couple believed Wordsworth to have betrayed his true values: 'He is a slave.' *Alastor* is a rewriting of the Wordsworthian vision, whose affirmations give way to agnostic uncertainty. Marilyn Butler sees the Preface to the poem as a critique of the older poet's imaginative viewpoint: '[the] Preface to ... [*Alastor*] suggests that ... [Shelley] is projecting the fate of an imaginary idealist who, in good faith but in the end unhappily, follows the moral prescription issued by Wordsworth in *The Excursion*'. ³ Such a view does justice to the teasing assertions in the poem of a belief in the ultimately unconvincing nature of such prescriptions, unconvincing because the idealist ends his days unhappily. The Preface manages to suggest by virtue of the apparent rigour of its moralistic standpoint ('these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse' ⁴), which seems so absolute, how true judgements can actually never be come by finally. The Preface is ironic, though this is not as structured as, say, Popeian irony. It is more incidental and in thrall to the complexities of experience as much as to those of narrative poetry. Shelley does not have the same recourse to the affirmative moral assurances of the Wordsworthian universe. In Book One of *The Excursion*, for example, Margaret's passing away does not lead to a feeling of emptiness in the way in which the Poet's death in *Alastor* does. Instead it forces the narrator of *The Excursion* to affirm that the

secret spirit of humanity

Which, mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of Nature, mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, *still survived.*

(my italics, 966-9) ⁵

Shelley, on the other hand, is weighed down by agnostic deliberation. Book Four of *The Excursion* also takes comfort in

an assured belief

That the procession of our fate, howe'er
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
Of infinite benevolence and power ...

(12-15) ⁶

Alastor eschews the mentioning of any such being and stipulates that nature is indifferent and inhospitable. The 'Power' of 'Mont Blanc' (1816) which 'dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene and inaccessible' (96-7) is also the power of *Alastor* and helps to seal the Poet's fate by ignoring him.

The Wordsworthian vision, then, is reworked both morally and stylistically. Shelley's awareness of the way in which life is never as clear cut as the existence of a Deity might make it implicit in the following statement from a letter written at the end of August 1815: ' Yet who is there that will not pursue phantoms, spend his choicest hours in hunting after dreams, and wake to perceive his error and regret that death is so near?' ⁷ The statement as a whole anticipates a sense of the way in which the *Alastor* Poet wanders after false gods. It displays a lingering sympathy for figures that do hunt after dreams, as if Shelley himself is not above the need for illumination. However, in the Preface to the poem, Shelley shows more condemnation than sympathy for the Poet: 'The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin.' ⁸ The poem itself seems to display sympathy with the Poet and endorses his attempts to gain knowledge but admittedly this is channelled through the Narrator who is less than objective. In spite of the Narrator, however, it is still pertinent to ask the question: why does Shelley write a poem which does not tally comfortably with the Preface? The answer is twofold. The Preface, as I argued above, does ironically suggest the inadequacies of its judgements by making them so absolute. In addition, the Preface seems to be

trying to simplify the poem and even explain it. There is also a view that it is the first, and most influential, critical account of the poem. Timothy Clark has pinpointed the way in which the Preface has lured critics into a distorted reading of the poem: 'Much criticism of *Alastor* exaggerates the incipient moralism of the second paragraph of Shelley's preface into an overall framework for interpreting the poem.'⁹

Perhaps Shelley himself, on realising the scope of the poem's complexity and equivocality, felt the need to present the reader with straightforward moralizing. In doing so, he was somewhat sidetracked into talking of the class that are 'deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth and cherishing no hopes beyond'.¹⁰ As Michael O'Neill comments, this class 'makes no appearance in the poem'.¹¹ The passage relates more closely to the following from the same letter of August 1815 that was quoted above: 'One man there is, [who does not pursue phantoms], and he is a cold and calculating man, who knows better than to waste life, but who alas! cannot enjoy it.'¹² Here Shelley suggests that such people are to be chided for not risking emotional tumult in the attempt to preserve life. Such self-preservation is a form of spiritual death; if it cuts off pain, it cuts off pleasure, too. The Poet of *Alastor*, on the other hand, though a solitary (and ultimately a victim of 'the horror the evil that comes to self in solitude'¹³) is, in the first paragraph of the Preface, admired because at least he makes an attempt to search for those 'phantoms'.

However, the Preface remains disjointed. It is as if the first paragraph, which has the poem in mind exclusively, triggers off other issues that Shelley felt he had to discuss while he was about it. The Preface's didacticism, therefore, is only indirectly related to the poem and is not reflective of its viewpoints; nor does it suggest the methods the poem uses to build its effects. Michael O'Neill, in this regard, also favours a reading that stresses the Preface's tangential character: 'Shelley is not so much trying to sum up the meaning of the poem he had written

as attacking attitudes to which the experience explored by the poem clarifies his opposition.' ¹⁴ Such a view stresses the fact of Shelley's didacticism in sections of the Preface, a didacticism that nonetheless manages to sidestep anything like a definitive interpretation of the poem. Stephen C. Behrendt sees the Preface almost as a work in its own right that does not so much arouse the expectation of elucidation as mirror the complexities of the poem itself in miniature: 'Shelley may have intended his preface to function in a manner analogous to that of Coleridge's preface to "Kubla Khan", as ... an apparent explanation of the poem that embodies its very contradictions in what appears to be a straightforward address to the reader.' ¹⁵ He goes on to say that 'the Preface's two paragraphs encapsulate the structure of the skeptical debate that likewise governs the poem that follows.' ¹⁶ His reading displaces the charge of disjointedness by arguing that the Preface's very difficulty reflects the poem's, and is therefore illuminating in that it prepares the reader for a similarly open-ended debate that cannot easily be resolved. What one can say is that the Preface illuminates as much for its outline of what is to come, both thematically and morally, as for the suggestion of the inadequacy of its premises.

ii

One of the problems that a reader of *Alastor* encounters is discerning the significance of the veiled maid of the Poet's dream. Her identity and origins can help us to fathom the meaning of the Poet and his experiences. Some clues can be found in Shelley's essay 'On Love' (1818). Like the contemporaneous discussion 'A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks', 'On Love' is full of suggestively phrased statements that shed light on the concept of what Jung calls the 'anima' figure - someone to whom we are attracted because he or she fulfils our spiritual and physical expectations while echoing our own constituents:

'We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.' ¹⁷

A similar passage in the 'Discourse' echoes this one: '[sexual connexion] ... soon becomes a very small part of that profound and complicated sentiment, which we call love, which is rather the universal thirst for a communion not merely of the senses, but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative and sensitive'. ¹⁸

Both passages examine respectively these two ideas of the Preface; firstly, the idea of the 'ideal prototype' ('He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception') and secondly, the idea of a threefold union of the senses, the intellect and the imagination ('the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher or the lover could depicture.' ¹⁹) The dream vision is the embodying and drawing together of these spiritual, intellectual and physical constituents in one person. The vision is an improvement on reality and offers an image of perfection in the midst not only of imperfection but also of a climate of wholly unrealized love. Thus the Poet's dream is more shadow than substance, its foundations not laid in any real experience - a derivation from an experience - and is open to the interpretation that it is narcissistic. In this light, the veiled maid is only a 'phantom', to use the phrase from the letter of August 1815 (quoted above), as a comparison with a later work - 'Una Favola'(1820) - with *Alastor* will help to bring out.

'Una Favola' has all the trappings of allegory but recalls the indeterminacy of *Alastor*. It is a tale of an unnamed youth's search for Death, personified as an eminently sexual woman. The piece attempts to offer an epigrammatic simplicity that is typical of parables. The youth's search suggests parallels with the Poet's. There is the same insistence on the fact that consummation can only be brought about through means that must ultimately lead to extinction. As William Ulmer

puts it in his discussion of *Alastor*, death is represented as 'the very seductiveness of oblivion [and as]... consummation'.²⁰ In *Alastor*, the veiled maid 'Folded his frame in her dissolving arms'.(187) There is, in this line, an insinuation of a return to primeval origins. It is a union brought about at a level so deep as to be terrible. 'Dissolving' also evokes the quality of the dream itself - impalpable and indistinct, subject to imminent extinction. It can be suggested, with 'Una Favola' in mind, that the Poet is subconsciously courting death in dreaming of the maid, in that it leads ultimately to his death. It is tempting to read the Poet's mind in this way given that the youth's pursuit in 'Una Favola' engenders a similar process of physical deterioration as does the Poet's pursuit in *Alastor*. The following extract from 'Una Favola' is followed by Richard Garnett's translation, as printed in the Julian edition. It should be noted, however, as Timothy Webb has pointed out, that 'There can be little doubt that Garnett polished Shelley's unfinished draft, with the result that his translation is based on his own immaculate version of *Una Favola* rather than on what Shelley actually wrote.'²¹

Da quel punto il giovane seguiva le orme della Morte, e si forte fu l'amore chi lo menava, che aveva circuito l'orbe, ed indagato ogni sua regione; e molti anni erano già spenti, ma le sofferanze più che gli anni avevano imbiancata la chioma ed appassito il fiore della forma, quando si trovò sui confini della stessa selva della quale aveva cominciato il suo misero errare.

[From that moment the youth pursued the track of Death; and so mighty was the love that led him, that he had encircled the world and searched through its regions, and many years were already spent, but sorrows rather than years had blanched his locks and withered the flower of his beauty, when he found himself upon the confines of the very forest from which his wretched wanderings had begun.]²²

This can be compared to an analogous passage in *Alastor*:

wildly he wandered on,
Day after day, a weary waste of hours,
Bearing within his life the brooding care
That ever fed on its decaying flame.
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering
Sung dirges in the wind ... (244-50)

'Care' engenders physical deterioration in *Alastor* as does 'sorrow' in 'Una Favola', though in the lines from *Alastor* there is the implication that such 'care' both consumes and nourishes the Poet. 'Brooding' (246) alerts the reader to an animation that is curiously understated but nonetheless potent. The lines 'his scattered hair / Sered by the autumn of strange suffering / Sung dirges in the wind', in their alliterative persistence, suggest a circular movement that multiplies and again implies a negative fertility, negative because it richly allows for dissolution as opposed to creation.

In 'Una Favola' the texture thrives, as in *Alastor*, on a self-reflexive solipsism that permeates the central figure's consciousness. Richard Cronin argues that the solipsism of *Alastor* is an 'absolute isolation of the self ... [which is] equivalent to death.'²³ It might be more accurate to say that solipsism creates the circumstances that allow for the Poet's death, as opposed to being merely equivalent to death, as Cronin puts it.

In *Alastor* the Poet's experiences are echoed by phenomena in the external world. Because of this, in the following example, one is unsure of identity and its significance:

And when two lessening points of light alone

Gleamed through the darkness, the alternate gasp
Of his faint respiration scarce did stir ...

(654-6)

Here we are struck by the way the verse, seemingly straightforwardly descriptive, allows for a sense of elusive disquiet to emerge. The first line has an incantatory lulling rhythm attributable both to the alliterative phrase 'lessening points of light' and the resignation inherent in 'And when two'. 'The alternate gasp / Of his faint respiration scarce did stir' is vivid because it gives the impression of an exactingness that clamps down on the experience in question but in doing so also allows the reader to apprehend the inadequacy of such exactingness. The lines seem also to press upon the reader the urge to make a connection with the 'beloved eyes' of line 332 that have in turn mingled with and anticipated the Poet's eyes. His eyes see themselves by virtue of an awareness aligned with the reductiveness of bodily dissolution:

His eyes beheld

Their own wan light through the reflected lines

Of his thin hair ... (469-71)

In 'Una Favola' we can also distinguish the hallmarks of a mirror-like intermingling of identities: 'E, sé quelle forme erano i spettri dei suoi proprii morti pensieri, ovvero le ombre dei vivi pensieri dell' Amore, nessuno può schiarire.' ['And none can expound whether these figures [the "veiled ministers" that attend on the youth] were the spectres of his own dead thoughts, or the shadows of the living thoughts of Love.'²⁴] The dichotomy, so simply expressed here, articulates one of the central ambiguities of *Alastor*: is the Poet's idealization of love a genuine and pertinent way of experiencing emotion, or merely the reflection of a frame of mind that creates, in this idealization, a self-

destructive preoccupation with the self? Given that the natural surroundings continually shun the Poet's desire for companionship, it is tempting to think that he is the victim of a self-imposed emotional isolation. But it is the achievement of the poem that it never wholly endorses or refutes such a reading.

What does emerge from both the Preface and the poem is that the Poet's desire is too transcendental to be accommodated within the limitations of the world, or, as Earl Wasserman puts it: 'Goodness irresistibly compels an infinite love that cannot be satisfied by the finite world and results in the luminary's "sudden extinction".'²⁵

While the natural surroundings are arguably hostile to the Poet in *Alastor*, in *Epipsychidion* (1821) nature provides a framework within which to experience a deep, and finally, destructive consummation of love. Shelley proposes that he and Emily elope to an island that will be both progenitor of, and witness to, an act of union:

Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
And our veins beat together; and our lips
With other eloquence than words, eclipse
The soul that burns between them, and the wells
Which boil under our being's inmost cells,
The fountains of our deepest life, shall be
Confused in passion's golden purity ...

(565-71)

This passage can be put alongside the following lines in *Alastor*, though it should be stressed that in the latter we are presented with a dream, whereas in *Epipsychidion* with a vision of desire:

He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled

His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
Her panting bosom: ... she drew back a while,
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.

(182-7)

The passage from *Alastor* is a potent mixture of robustness and vulnerability, vitality and sickness. It captures the way in which what the Poet dreams about detonates a potential for what is as much destructive as liberating. One is aware of a certain muscularity in the verse in such phrases as 'He reared his shuddering limbs ' and 'and spread his arms to meet / Her panting bosom'. The verbs are alive with a sense of compulsion - a notion developed more overtly in the lines 'yielding to the irresistible joy, / With frantic gesture and short breathless cry / Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.' The verse has a potency which is manifested in the telegram-like 'frantic gesture' and 'short breathless cry'. The phrases lend an air of pregnant foreboding. The final line suggests both tenderness and extinction and 'dissolving' also anticipates the way in which the dream will presently fade.

In *Epipsychidion* Shelley is more detached even though caught up in the momentum of sexual realisation. We are still aware of the fact that he is able to shape the contours of the poem's imaginings. By contrast, in *Alastor*, the Poet is vulnerable and defenceless against the implicit suggestion of the violation of his mind. A mood of such violation is established in the lines that follow the vision (192-196). This passage stresses disorientation and distancing, as if the Poet is abruptly brought back down to earth. The Poet is not master of his desires, despite the envisaging of satiation; instead he is in thrall to them, and a recipient of what might be described as a providential message: 'The spirit of sweet human love has sent / A vision to the sleep of him who spurned / Her choicest gifts.'

(203-5) These lines, however, are problematic. They suggest that the Poet's fate is beyond his control. Evan K. Gibson explains them by saying that 'the dormant spirit of sweet human nature in the poet's own nature, sent the vision' ²⁶, thus displacing an allegorical reading that would endorse the suggestion that the spirit is a supernatural being. Gibson's reading is intriguing even though it fails to explain how such a spirit can reside within the Poet, as he stipulates, when the lines make clear a sense of outside intervention. The lines only make sense when they are seen to work on two levels: an allegorical one that does indeed endorse the view that the dream is an 'Act of God' ordaining the Poet's fate, but also a literal level that illustrates how the Poet's ensuing deterioration was self-contained from the beginning in that his potential for realising, externally, his own internal love in another being - a love that every human being is privy to, at least before their decision to reject it - has fallen back on itself and instead produced a corruption of love. From this perspective, the Poet is not 'greatly good' in the terms of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1821): 'A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.'²⁷ This is something that the Poet does not do. He is incapable of forgetting himself. Timothy Clark is anxious to stress the way in which the charge of narcissism that the Poet may be open to is attributable not to vanity but to a realisation of the complexities of the self: 'The poet's dream ... is not in any sense a visionary or mystical moment, but essentially an introspective crisis, the dawn of self-knowledge and self-consciousness. If this is narcissism it is a form far removed from any implication of vanity.'²⁸ Michael O'Neill also points out that *Alastor* holds both moralistic and indulgent arguments in suspension: '[The Preface] ... launches a poem which is neither sentimental nor censorious in its overall effect.'²⁹ Such a view stresses the poetry's tendency to invite, from the reader, the making of judgements, while at the same time suggesting that such judgements, though not exactly irrelevant, are always one step removed from the

intricacies of the emotional arena in which the Poet's experiences lie. In my view, in this arena, the self is mingled with that which lies beyond it to such a point of inseparability that the reader can only evaluate the meaning of the Poet's experiences while not straying outside the vistas of this interchangeability. The Poet cannot be examined in isolation from his dream, nor can he be evaluated independently of the Narrator's version of the Poet's story. The Poet, the dream and the Narrator all suggest successive realisations and redefinitions of the poem's raw material: the quest for communion in man and nature. This inseparability can only be fully apprehended when the reader himself has been immersed in the poem's situations to the point at which his responses become an extension of this indivisibility. Ultimately, Narrator, Poet and reader overlap in the shared subjectivities of their perceptions. Shelley suggests that our perceptions are as valid, or as inadequate, as those of the characters in his poem. Our experience of the poem therefore becomes as indeterminate as the poem itself.

With regard to the earlier point of forgetting oneself it is useful to note that Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in a passage of his late work the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776), claims to be able to do just that. G. Kim Blank describes how Rousseau has been cited as being the prototype of the poet in *Alastor*³⁰ and refers the reader to Donald L. Maddox who points out that Shelley was familiar with both *The Confessions* (1770) and *Reveries* of Rousseau by the time he had written *Alastor*.³¹ The Poet's inability to direct his mind outwards is the very opposite of what Rousseau describes in this passage of the *Reveries*, which is a series of meditations on the pleasures and drawbacks of solitude:

My meditations and reveries are never more delightful than when I can forget myself. I feel transports of joy and inexpressible raptures in becoming fused as it were with the great system of beings and identifying myself with the whole of nature.³²

However, a later passage, after making clear Rousseau's resignation towards a solitary life, pinpoints a similar dissatisfaction with the ordinary objects of the world that the *Alastor* Poet shares: 'I cannot as I once did throw myself headlong into this great ocean of nature, because my enfeebled and diminished faculties can no longer find any objects sufficiently distinct, stable and accessible to give them a firm hold'.³³ Rousseau is like the moon in Shelley's fragment addressed to it, 'wandering companionless... And ever changing, like a joyless eye / That finds no object worth its constancy'. (3, 5-6)

As he admits in *The Confessions*, Rousseau had solved the problem of not being able to realise his desires in the real world by inventing creatures in his imagination: he wrote *Julie; ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) as he relates in this passage of *The Confessions*: 'seeing nothing that existed worthy of my exalted feelings, I fostered them in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings after my own heart.'³⁴

The Poet's vision may be a similar form of substitutional creativity, but this turns out to be not so much cathartic as debilitating. The dream precipitates a search that cannot be resolved. In addition it can also be argued that the fact that we never see the Poet labouring at his art is attributable to the preemptive vacuum that the dream induces:

The cold white light of morning, the blue moon
Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,
The distinct valley and the vacant woods...

(193-5)

Suddenly the natural landscape is desolate, and its hostility is unambiguously acknowledged in these lines. The bare, stripped style in itself is an echo of the manner in which the natural landscape has been undressed and its inner hollowness revealed. 'Distinct' and 'vacant', in the last line, are both words that

yield rich effects in that, in the context of the above passage, what might normally be merely descriptive is given a psychological edge. 'Vacant' was an important word for Shelley and his use of its noun at the end of 'Mont Blanc' denotes a state of creative barrenness - exactly what the Poet is now experiencing. The dream makes the Poet perceive nature differently, as its potential for creativity is replaced by a potential for infertility.

It is useful to compare the passage from lines 193 to 195 with a passage from Keats's *Endymion* (1818), which is similar to *Alastor* in that it is 'a parable of ... the poetic soul striving after full communion with [the] ... spirit of essential Beauty.'³⁵

Endymion awoke, that grief of hers
Sweet-paining on his ear: he sickly guessed
How lone he was once more, and sadly pressed
His empty arms together, hung his head,
And most forlorn upon that widowed bed
Sat silently. (II, 855-60)³⁶

Here, however, the psychological edge is missing from Keats's writing. The finality of the verse - partly brought about by the couplet form - gives the meaning a less provisional, improvisatory quality. It would be inconceivable for Shelley in *Alastor* to allow his poetic texture to subside into the deliberation that such a comment as 'he sickly guessed / How lone he was once more' would feel comfortable in. These lines offer a definite comment that pinpoints Endymion's state of isolation and, as such, provide an orientation point for the reader. Our awareness of the *Alastor* Poet's aloneness only emerges gradually and obliquely from the rich density of Shelley's verse. His refusal to define exactly yields a richness of poetic meaning that takes on board only the suggestion of aloneness.

The barrenness that the dream induces helps to speed the Poet's dissolution and decay and represents a denial of a creative outlet that might be his salvation. He, like the Rousseau of *The Triumph of Life* (1822), is "overcome / By [his] ... own heart alone". (240-1)

iii

To some extent this inability to rein in emotion that characterises Rousseau's utterance in *The Triumph of Life* is also the bane of the Narrator of *Alastor*. He is in thrall to his own perceptions and his comments are never characterised by anything more than an oblique perception of reality. In this respect he echoes the way that the Poet perceives his own status and the status of his relation to the natural surroundings. Both the Poet and the Narrator think that they have reached a level of communion with nature that is profound though to the reader such a view is, at best, problematic and, at worst, erroneous. These discrepancies in the protagonists' and reader's perceptions are in themselves not evidence of indeterminacy; what is an embodiment of indeterminacy is the fact that Shelley forces the reader to resolve these discrepancies, as he himself refuses to.

The Narrator's oblique interpretation of the Poet's relation to the environment around him at the end of the poem is a firm reflection of the fact that there are no easy signposts that might offer significant guidance to the reader and allow us to assess the meaning of the Poet's experiences. Here is the passage:

Thou canst no longer know or love the shapes
Of this phantasmal scene, who have to thee
Been purest ministers, who are, alas!
Now thou art not. (696-9)

The passage illustrates the way in which both the Narrator and the Poet announce unwitting truths. 'Phantasmal' suggests nature's intangible, illusory quality to the reader, but to the Narrator it is a word whose connotations are confined only to aesthetic, rather than psychological spheres of meaning. The telling thing about these lines, then, is that this other level is unperceived by the speaker and this clash accounts for their success (and difficulty). In addition, the phrase 'who are, alas! / Now thou art not' creates the expectation that the scene around might, in an act of homage, change after the Poet's death - a fitting tribute to the Poet. Such an expectation is erroneous as is clear from the fact that even when the Poet was alive the natural scene remained intractable and firmly unresponsive to the psychological communing with it that the Poet was attempting to instigate.

A similar passage also pinpoints this duality of interpretative 'knowing' in the poem:

Thy darksome stillness

Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,

Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course

Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,

And measureless ocean may declare as soon ...

(505-9)

The Poet is unaware of the irony of his statements: he is describing a sense of negative power - a force that is 'darksome', 'hollow' and 'searchless' (undiscoverable). These adjectives imply a detachment and coldness at the heart of the stream and indeed the Poet's comparison is correct - but not in the way that he thinks it is - in pinpointing his emotional vacuity rather than his spiritual richness. The technique leaves the reader at first groping for an orientation point as we are being told something that has no cut and dried finality to it.

Part of Shelley's achievement in the poem is the way in which he eschews comments that have such a cut and dried finality to them. Even such an apparently simple line as the first of the poem still manages to contain within it future indications of the poem's 'protean evasion of any [efforts] to pin it down into an assertion.' ³⁷ That first line immediately suggests an unquestioning, implicit kinship: 'Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!' By the end of the poem it is clear that such kinship as exists - either between humans or between humans and nature - is more illusory than real, though the line's phrasing invites us into reading it as a declaration of unity.

Shelley sets a trap for his reader by creating moods and expectations which are then countered by the poetry's subtle, but nonetheless insistent, awareness of what lies beyond the apparently neat domain of language. By the end of the second verse-paragraph of the poem the concision and harmony of the opening has been replaced ^{by} a mood of only implied unity:

I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
May modulate with murmurs of the air,
And motions of the forests and the sea,
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.

(45-9)

The first line, patient and respectful, suggests that illumination is not far off. The Narrator yearns for a happy communion, something inherent in the alliterative movement of 'that my strain / May modulate with murmurs of the air, / And motions of the forests'. The clauses build quietly toward the cadential phrase 'the deep heart of man'. But the very easefulness of this listing betrays a fear of unresponsiveness. The list becomes too long and this communicates tugs of pensiveness that suggest an underlying uncertainty. The Narrator seems to be

full of faith; in fact he is dimly aware of his own lack of it. On coming to these lines again after reading the whole poem it is clear that they are an anticipation of the Narrator's loss of faith in man and his own personal religion. As Christine Gallant puts it: 'In [the] ... closing lines there seeps out a hatred for the world and the "heartless" (690) men in it, rather than any love.'³⁸ However, it should be noted that the doubt that is there from the beginning allows such a transformation to occur smoothly, for we can assume that, as the Narrator begins his tale, he knows how it will end and this knowledge undermines his assertions.

There are also other examples in the Narrator's opening invocation that illustrate the way in which the poem thrives imaginatively on the interplay between states of actuality and states of possibility: the discrepancy accounts for the changing psychological terrain of the poetry. For example, in this passage the provisionality is apparent:

Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. (26-9)

The phrase 'of what we are' immediately alerts the reader to a climate of doubt and uncertainty - the phrase is vague enough (yet at the same time has its roots in a kind of absolute reality) to allow for possibilities of malleability and change as regards the status of 'what we are'. 'What we are' is open to continual redefinition as is illustrated by the fact that throughout the course of the poem the Poet's status changes from a literal one of recognisable humanity to one of allegorical shadowiness. By the end we are unsure whether the Poet's symbolic and emblematic quality is now completely divorced from his human roots. The phrase prepares the reader for the possibility of change and anticipates the

elemental reduction of the Poet. Similarly there is something curiously indefinite in the following lines:

In lone and silent hours,
When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
Like an inspired and desperate alchemist
Staking his very life on some dark hope,
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
With my most innocent love ... (29-34)

The resemblances to *Frankenstein* (1818) have been noticed by various commentators³⁹, but the lines are less straightforward than a corresponding passage in the novel.⁴⁰ It is true to say that Frankenstein and his monster resemble each other in their alienation from society but the resemblance between the Poet and the Narrator, say, or the Poet and his dream-vision, is more subtle because less palpable. In the above passage a line such as 'Like an inspired and desperate alchemist' impresses because its quasi-oxymoronic phrase jars to some extent. The condition is not resolved but passed over and this precipitates a mood of unperceivable foreboding echoed in the phrase 'awful talk and asking looks'. What precisely does this awfulness consist of? The phrase has connotations of both reverence and foreboding. F. R. Leavis might have taken such lines to be evidence of Shelley's 'weak grasp upon the actual.'⁴¹ The muffling effect they induce, however, allows the poetry to assume a resonance best defined by the absence of precisely what it is that the lines call into deeper question. By carrying an elusive and imperceptible sense of frustration and unrest, the passage illustrates the way in which the Narrator's disillusionment - a disillusionment that stems from the knowledge of the tragic quality of the Poet's life - seeps into, and alters, the tone of his narrative. As yet the reader can not discern why he is disillusioned and will only do so when he reaches the poem's

end. In one sense the Narrator's recounting of the Poet's story is also the telling of his own in that his inquiry into nature echoes the Poet's. And, like the Poet, his efforts lead not to illumination but to 'pale despair and cold tranquility' (718).

The line 'When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness' (30) seems to have been reworked from Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' (1798):

Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. (8-10) ⁴²

Coleridge's poem does not incorporate the teasing sub-texts that Shelley's poem offers the reader. Coming to Coleridge's lines after a reading of the whole of 'Frost at Midnight' confirms their quality of clarity and pellucidness. Coming to lines 29 to 34 of *Alastor* after a reading of the whole poem enables us to see that they contain intimations of what is to come. The germ of unrest here - and the implicit sense of the disquieting quality of nature - points to the later elaboration of the landscape's inhospitality, something that is not dispersed by the exact dissection of experience that line 30 denotes.

iv

In *Alastor* the natural landscape displays an almost human refusal to elucidate, manifested in its continual changing and altering in relation to, and in anticipation of, the events that unfold. Nature is never a token of the habitual and the familiar as it is in, for example, the first verse-paragraph of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (1798). The following phrases from Wordsworth's poem all point towards the notion of taking comfort in the presence of the familiar: 'and again I hear / These waters'(2-3); 'Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty

cliffs'(4-5); 'The day is come when I again repose'(9).⁴³ 'Tintern Abbey' does move into a more questioning phase after this but it builds to an affirmative mood which invites the reader to put his faith in nature. We can never put our faith in the nature of *Alastor*, however. In *Alastor*, nature's protean ability to metamorphosize into something else strips it of any potential it may have had for engendering the security of familiarity. Similarly, when Wordsworth mentions his 'obstinate questionings'(145) in the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* (first published in 1807) the phrase does not, in its context, arouse so firmly as in Shelley's (26) the suggestion that these questions will not be answered:

But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings ... (145-7)⁴⁴

The reader is aware of the way in which Wordsworth inserts the phrase at a transitional moment: its threat is kept at bay by the almost casual way in which the verse unfolds (145). In *Alastor* such nonchalance is replaced by a reticence that suggests unrest by its refusal to elaborate: 'Hoping to still these obstinate questionings' (26).

There is a moment in *The Prelude* (1805) when we see, fleetingly, the emergence of a similar picture of natural inhospitability as that which emerges in *Alastor*. However, as in 'Tintern Abbey', we can discern a similar movement away from doubt into affirmation. It occurs after Wordsworth has recounted the theft of a boat 'tied / Within a rocky cave' (I, 374-5).⁴⁵ The journey he then makes is characterised by a quality of nightmarish animation:

And as I rose upon the stroke my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan -
When from behind that craggy steep, till then

The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. (403-12) ⁴⁶

Here Wordsworth describes a scene bereft of its capacity for exuding security. Later on he cannot place the new sense of the encounter's nature:

... and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness - call it solitude
Or blank desertion ... (417-22) ⁴⁷

This temporary disquiet and unrest; this mood of apprehension and danger is short-lived and is dispersed by the underlying tone of ultimate benignity in the next verse-paragraph. This begins very similarly to the second verse-paragraph of *Alastor*. Both verse-paragraphs start with apostrophes ('Mother of this unfathomable world!' and 'Wisdom and spirit of the universe!') and both exude a progression towards a cadential moment. In *Alastor* the moment is an illusion, in *The Prelude* it is real and carved out in words of lucid clarity:

... purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought
And sanctifying by such discipline

Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

(437-41, my italics) ⁴⁸

The last phrase is the antidote to the ignorance that comes about through the presence of the 'unknown modes of being' (420). By contrast, the unrest and insecurity of the earlier passage of Book I (417-22) gets taken up as the prevailing mood of *Alastor*: it is the rule and not the exception. *Alastor* takes it upon itself to explore 'unknown modes of being.'

'Unknown modes of being' might serve as a description of natural transformations in the poem. These confer an alienness on nature that is the more disquieting because of the human element in the transformations. For example, a passage late on in the poem reflects the way in which nature becomes endowed with human characteristics even as the Poet loses them:

The wave

Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,
Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,
Or falling spear-grass, or their own decay
Had e'er disturbed before. (408-12)

The specific pinpointing that is going on here ('marred their pensive task', 'Had e'er disturbed before') allows the human element to seem natural, as if it were what was expected: in fact, it is clear that what has been described is highly surreal. The humanisation of nature gives its rejection of the Poet a more terrible meaning - it is not merely indiscriminate but the product of a sensitivity comparable to the Poet's. The 'yellow flowers'(406) that 'For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes'(407) also contribute to the general feel here of an insidious, disquietingly alive presence, in addition to furthering the sense within the poem

of a kinship that exists - albeit, subtle and imperceptible - between a nature that may be open to the charge of narcissism, and the Poet, who may also be open to that charge. The ambiguity of whether or not the Poet is detached from others and the manner of his psychic fluidity (for example, see lines 153 to 154: 'Her voice was like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought') displaces a charge of mere narcissism. We must also reject such a charge in a poem like Coleridge's 'Constancy to an Ideal Object' (1804-7? 1823? 1826?) which displays a similar tendency to mingle identities, leaving the reader in the possession of an experience that is disorientating yet illuminating: 'Yet still thou haunt'st me; and though well I see, / She is not thou, and only thou art she'. (11-12) ⁴⁹

In *Alastor* Shelley gains some of his most interesting effects by deliberately putting the manner in which something is stated against its meaning. The following passage provides an example of this device:

And what am I that I should linger here,
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty ... (285-8)

The carefully modulated tone quietly arouses alienation in the reader: we do not quite know how to interpret the Poet's utterance. What he states seems to be an assertion of egotism - but the easeful and accumulative style in which it is related gives the statements the naturalness of an announcement of humility. A similar clash between form and content characterises the Narrator's utterances. Early on in the poem he describes the Poet's death:

A lovely youth, - no mourning maiden decked

With weeping flowers, or votive cypress wreath,
The lone couch of his everlasting sleep: -
Gentle, and brave, and generous, - no lorn bard
Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh...

(55-9)

The Narrator seems to be describing this universal inactivity as if it betokened an elaborate system of recognition, as opposed to mere reticence. There is, implicit in this 'listing', a sense of fertility and abundance, as if there are many and various manifestations of the Poet's continuing presence. But in fact all that the Narrator speaks of is neglect and he gives his words an energy that is in direct opposition to their meaning: the kind of energy that we would expect to characterise an assertion of celebration rather than what is, in effect, an announcement of inactivity. He completely misjudges the way in which to unfold the story, even so early on as in the first verse-paragraph of the poem proper. It is as if this very insistence on abstemiousness were the norm, rather than there being an emphasis on the duty of recognition and remembrance that might register the fact of the Poet's active place in society. The Narrator remains unaware that he too adds to this state of inertia when, at the end of the poem, he unknowingly argues for a further avoidance of a human response to the situation. This unknowingness is his inability to fathom the implications of his request: namely, that in making it he is unconsciously furthering the neglect of the Poet:

Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting's woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
Their own cold powers. (707-710)

Even if such acts, of versification, painting and sculpture, are insufficient they would still have signalled a response, a human attempt to commemorate. As it is any communicative empathy between people remains completely unrealized. The Narrator asks for the means to further allow the emotionally crippling effects of silence and solitariness to subsist in his abdication of the need for duty here. Ironically, early on he attributes a type of human possessiveness to the very non-human quality that he unconsciously propagates: 'And Silence, too enamoured of that voice, / Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.' (65-6) The whole passage from lines 50 to 66, which seems to awaken sympathy in the reader, also arouses a certain estrangement from the Poet. Thus the events of the poem - the Poet's estrangement and the Narrator's final alienation from what he sees as a kind of order in the 'Mother of this unfathomable world' (though even here the note of complexity that betokens disorder is struck in the word 'unfathomable') - are actually carried a step further into the realm of the reader's responses so that we too, like the strangers that the Poet encounters, play a part in the alienation process because our responses to him are displaced. And finally the Poet's reticence and inability to act are endorsed by the Narrator's echoic call for reticence and inaction.

These levels of meaning, elusive and initially hard to discern as they are, ultimately reinforce the sense of the poem's indeterminacy and provisionality. The poem is not a fixed statement. It lacks the trappings of a Wordsworthian foundation which, though subject to doubts and questionings, is nonetheless a foundation. *Alastor* emerges as a poem that is like a changing mist, ungraspable and intangible. Its elusiveness is brought about by the presence of the void that exists in between words and the meanings that have a life of their own which lies beyond words. And this disparity is paralleled most clearly in the Poet and Narrator's own problematic interpretations of the self. An extract from a letter from Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener in June 1811 anticipates a sense of the uncertainties and fluctuations that beat at the heart of the poem:

We look around us - we find that we exist, we find ourselves reasoning upon the mystery which involves our being - we see virtue & vice, we see light & darkness, each are separate, distinct; the line that divides them is glaringly perceptible; yet how racking it is to the soul, when inquiring into its own operations, to find that perfect virtue is very far from attainable, to find reason tainted by feeling, to see the mind when analysed exhibit a picture of irreconcilable inconsistencies, even when perhaps a moment before, it imagined that it had grasped the fleeting Phantom of virtue.-⁵⁰

Julian and Maddalo
Inscrutability and Suffering

Julian and Maddalo (1819), like *Alastor* (1816), has at its centre a protagonist characterised by a heightened sensibility. Like the Poet of *Alastor*, the Maniac of *Julian and Maddalo* cannot accommodate the intensity of his desires to the limitations of the world. Both figures are victims of 'too exquisite a perception' of passion.¹ However, the Maniac of *Julian and Maddalo* arouses the expectation of elucidation with regard to the meaning of the poem in a way in which the Poet of *Alastor* does not. The Maniac's appearance in the poem is carefully timed to seem a possible means of resolving the argument between Julian and Maddalo. And yet it does not resolve anything; instead it suggests that the provisional nature of the argument has been overshadowed by the inscrutability of the Maniac's sufferings.

The centrepiece of the poem - the Maniac's soliloquy - is the part of the poem that yields least guidance from Shelley for the reader. Throughout the soliloquy Shelley is completely anonymous. The soliloquy remains uninterrupted. This detachment from the part of the poem that most demands an interpretative gloss makes it very difficult to comment on the significance of the Maniac, even as Shelley has structured *Julian and Maddalo* so as to suggest that the Maniac is the key to the work. The reader is immersed in the drama of the Maniac's life in that his soliloquy suggests the contradictions and complexities of reality much more acutely than Julian and Maddalo's theorising. By being so uncompromising Shelley demands from the reader a level of involvement in the poem that reachest its furthest depths only when the reader has, as it were, become a part of it. Shelley does not give the reader an objective emotional framework in which to place the poem. Instead he asks that the reader become a part of the poem by

channelling his own subjective judgements into it and so lend it a different type of objectivity, one that ultimately finds its source within the 'text of every heart' (from the Preface²).

The dating of *Julian and Maddalo* is a vexed issue and various commentators have differing theories about the poem's composition that respectively make a case either for its structural unity or incoherence. Steven E. Jones argues that Shelley began the poem 'at Este between September 29 and October 11, 1818, but composed the bulk of it early in 1819, and may have drafted some lines (for the Maniac's soliloquy) after June 7, 1819.'³ In a letter to Leigh Hunt, dated August 15 1819, Shelley says: '[*Julian and Maddalo*] ... was composed last year at Este'.⁴ G. M. Matthews has speculated: 'Although Shelley's definite statement [that] it "was composed last year at Este" limits the date of composition to 23 August - 5 November 1818, the poem could in theory have been written any time during the year between 23 August 1818 (Shelley's first ride with Byron) and 15 August 1819 (when the manuscript was sent to Hunt from Rome).'⁵ He goes on to suggest that Shelley was still making additions to the poem in March 1819 and adds that the whole poem might have been composed at that time.⁶ Donald Reiman has explained this discrepancy between the date given to the poem by Shelley (1818) and the compositional evidence by saying that 'Shelley ... [was] attempting to dissociate the poem from Mary's recently articulated depression of spirits [resulting from the death of her daughter Clara], as well as from his own mood'.⁷ Reiman goes on to say that parts of the Maniac's soliloquy could have been written after the death of William Shelley in June 1819 and that Shelley may have been trying to distance utterances reflective of William's death by weaving them into a 'story [the Maniac's] inspired by Tasso and by others like him'.⁸ It may be that Reiman's theories are a little speculative. In any case the poem does not need these autobiographical explanations to be provided in order to offer a worthwhile experience.

Reiman has also pointed out the connection between the poem and the fragment known as *Prince Athanase* (written between 1817 and 1819 and first published in 1824).⁹ Prince Athanase is a 'youth, who ... Had grown quite weak and gray before his time' (1-2). The poem insists consistently both on the incommunicability and acuteness of Athanase's melancholy. Athanase, like the Maniac, is hounded by his own thoughts:

And through his sleep, and o'er each waking hour,
Thoughts after thoughts, unresting multitudes,

Were driven within him by some secret power ...

(65-67)

But Athanase also incorporates, as Reiman points out here, another version of Julian: 'The portrait of Athanase shows the reuniting of Shelley's inner and outer selves embodied [respectively] in the maniac and Julian'.¹⁰ In the following lines we discern a sense of Athanase's openness, a trait that Julian shares:

Liberal he was of soul, and frank of heart,
And to his many friends - all loved him well -
Whate'er he knew or felt he would impart,

If words he found those inmost thoughts to tell ...

(46-49)

However, *Prince Athanase* does not so much demonstrate its emotion as insist rather artificially on it. Its form, the *terza rima* of Dante that Shelley also employed in *The Triumph of Life* (1822), does not liberate the verse, but stifles it. *Prince Athanase* lacks the stylistic control that allows *Julian and Maddalo* to

convey similar emotional tumult with such a contrasting honesty and subtlety. The latter poem imitates the way life illuminates, deceives expectations and finally remains inscrutable, by refusing to settle for the notion that art is an improvement on life.

ii

The style of *Julian and Maddalo* broke new ground for Shelley in that it exudes little poetic artifice and is conversational in a manner in which his earlier poems were not. In the letter to Leigh Hunt quoted above Shelley has this to say:

I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education & a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms ... Not that the familiar style is to be admitted in the treatment of a subject wholly ideal, or in that part of any subject which relates to the common life, where the passion exceeding a certain limit touches the boundaries of that which is ideal. ¹¹

The second section of this extract talks of 'passion' that exceeds a certain limit and so becomes 'ideal'. Clearly, the Maniac's utterances fall into this category and so merit a style that is not 'familiar'. The Maniac's soliloquy is in fact both artificial and realistic. The term the 'familiar style' can be applied more accurately to the passages of the poem which are more conversational, namely, the exchanges between Julian and Maddalo which are characterised by a Byronic ruminativeness. For example, lines 215 to 219 seem to have been modelled on Byron's *The Lament of Tasso* (1817), which, as Carlos Baker has pointed out, was

a definite influence on *Julian and Maddalo*.¹² Stephen C. Behrendt sees Shelley's adoption of a style favoured by Byron as both 'audacious and shrewd', since the poem 'subverts most of what Byron stands for'.¹³ But does the poem subvert so readily as Behrendt seems to be suggesting? Byron's pessimism, though ostensibly attacked by Julian, nonetheless had a foothold in Shelley's being and the poem's ending has a quality of bleakness that suggests that Maddalo is right all along. Though Shelley, as in the following extract, expressed misgivings, one can also say that something in his poetic identity thrived on the notion of Byron's 'insanity': 'The spirit in which it is written [*Child Harold*, Canto IV] is, if insane, the most wicked and mischievous insanity that was ever given forth.'¹⁴ (To Thomas Love Peacock, [17 or 18] December 1818) Such insanity finds its way into *Julian and Maddalo* and the Byronic pessimism that he seeks to remedy has partial roots in his own character so that the poem, on one level, is one of self-confrontation as opposed to confrontation with another. As Earl Wasserman puts it: 'Julian and Maddalo are Shelley's divided and conflicting selves skeptically confronting each other ... and the poem, in effect, is Shelley's debate with himself.'¹⁵ Wasserman's point is valid, though it should be stressed that the views Maddalo holds are only Shelleyan in an indirect way. They are explicit articulations as voiced through Maddalo's persona of what Shelley perceived to be potential, as opposed to definite truths.

With regard to the poem's familiar style it is important to bear in mind that Shelley's poem, like all his major works, is a remoulding of a literary genre. In this case, Shelley has not only Byron in mind but also Pope, as Richard Cronin has pointed out: '*Julian and Maddalo* begins from within a tradition which is Horatian and Popean'.¹⁶ He also remarks that the phrase '*sermo pedestris*' which Shelley uses to describe the poem's style in a letter to his publisher in May 1820¹⁷ was also used to describe the 'colloquial style that seemed to derive from Horace's manner'¹⁸, a manner that Pope had emulated in his *Imitations of Horace*. In these works, however, form dictates meaning; Pope's poetry has,

instead of the suggestiveness and delicacy of *Julian and Maddalo*, a more functional expressiveness. In these poems artifice is the key note. In, for example, 'The Sixth Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated' (1738) Pope's regular rhythm always makes sure that the rhyme is firmly enunciated and this creates an effect of declamatory rigour:

Admire we then what Earth's low entrails hold,
Arabian shores, or Indian seas infold?
All the mad trade of Fools and Slaves for Gold?
Or Popularity, or Stars and Strings?
The Mob's applauses, or the gifts of Kings?

(11-15) ¹⁹

Four out of five of these lines are end-stopped and these four are all questions. Such deliberation lends the verse an air of intractability whereas Shelley, in *Julian and Maddalo*, while employing the same verse form - the rhyming couplet - gives his lines a fluidity that suggests the provisionality of events that unfold leisurely, almost haphazardly. This is the predominant impression gained at the opening of the poem. But Shelley's use of the rhyming couplet in later passages - namely, the Maniac's soliloquy - points to the way in which the control that this form betokens is overridden by emotional forces that Pope's poetry would simply not have attempted to simulate. In the following lines the tone is almost incidental but the precision of the verse gives the lines a quality of expectation:

I rode one evening with Count Maddalo
Upon the bank of land which breaks the flow
Of Adria towards Venice: - a bare strand
Of hillocks, heaped from ever-shifting sand,
Matted with thistles and amphibious weeds... (1-5)

The lines immediately establish a mood of intimacy and convey an impression of the openness and ease with which Julian might actually speak to the reader. Their elegance is in part owing to the unobtrusiveness of the rhymes but also to the manner in which the lines flow into one another, while not suggesting the untidiness of something that is without design. The writing's very provisionality suggests that the passage is not a fixed statement and contains intimations that lie beyond its straightforwardness. The phrase ' - a bare strand / Of hillocks, heaped from ever-shifting sand', while pinpointing a process of change and flux, also conveys an impression of variability by virtue of its casual nonchalance. This variability is an initial announcement of the poem's method of indeterminacy which alerts the reader to the way in which reality in the poem is susceptible to change and is therefore inconclusive.

Even in a poem like Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), which is comparable to *Julian and Maddalo* in a way in which the *Imitations of Horace* are not - namely in its more highly charged emotional climate - we can still discern the absence of that particular quality of rawness that characterises, say, the Maniac's utterances. In *Eloisa to Abelard* the form contains and subdues the emotions; in *Julian and Maddalo* the Maniac's passage suggests merely a formal bow to the rhyming couplet. In Pope's following lines the intensity of the emotion is contained behind something of a courtly veil:

O death all-eloquent! you only prove
What dust we doat on, when 'tis man we love.

(335-336)²⁰

The phrase 'O death all-eloquent!' is characterised by a ready-made concision that, by its very exactness, seems to deny spontaneity. The Maniac's lines, on the other hand, contain volatility within their fluidity:

I give thee tears for scorn and love for hate,
And that thy lot may be less desolate
Than his on whom thou tramplest, I refrain
From that sweet sleep which medicines all pain.

(496-499)

The first line here mingles diametrically opposed emotions in such a way as to allow the possibility of emotional fluctuation as a force to emerge through the veil of the apparent control of the Maniac. The acceptance implicit in 'Than his on whom thou tramplest' only just manages to hide its suppressed hysteria. The lines carry sub-texts that suggest that their immediate import masks a deeper meaning that presses upon the reader the fact of the Maniac's disturbed state of mind. 'I refrain / From that sweet sleep which medicines all pain' has about it a ring of familiarity (perhaps in part attributable to its resemblance to Hamlet's most famous soliloquy (III. i. 59-61)²¹), despite the namelessness of 'that sweet sleep', a phrase that mingles the possibility of release and a sense of the indeterminacy of something ungraspable. The passage thus achieves a peculiar resonance through its layered concision. Such layering allows the poem to offer the reader intimations of an emotional disquiet that, though attributable to language, also lies beyond its immediate realm.

iii

One of the difficulties of *Julian and Maddalo* that a reader encounters is the question of both how far to identify with Julian, who tells the story and therefore seems to have a greater claim on our attention, and whether or not the persona of Julian is merely a projection of Shelley himself. It is useful to note, in passing, that the original manuscript of the poem, in Steven E. Jones's facsimile edition,

reveals that Maddalo refers to Julian as 'Yorick' ²² , a reference to the parson to whom a black page is devoted in Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. This device alerts us to the way the poem initially had artifice in mind as a means with which to distance the protagonists. In Sterne's novel Yorick comes across as a person who, like Julian, is too pure for the world:

... He was utterly unpractised in the world; and, at the age of twenty-six, knew just about as well how to steer his course in it, as a romping, unsuspecting girl of thirteen ... But, in plain truth, he was a man unhackneyed and unpractised in the world, and was altogether as indiscreet and foolish on every other subject of discourse where policy is wont to impress restraint. ²³

Given Yorick's naïvety it becomes easy to see why Maddalo calls Julian by this name because the latter was imagined early on by Shelley to be similarly naïve and inexperienced: "'Look [Yorick] in the ~~sun~~^{West}, & listen well"' (10) ²⁴

As Jerrold E. Hogle has pointed out, the poem is, like *Alastor*, a 'piece with an only half-reliable narrator'. ²⁵ Julian begins the poem in the manner almost of an omniscient narrator. His leisurely style suggests that, as readers, we will be given access to all the information that we might require. At the end of the poem, however, Julian withholds such information quite brutally and this upsets the notion of an omniscient narrator. He himself seems to disown his earlier openness and the delight he displayed in the art of the exchange of ideas. Julian, at the start of the poem, has ultimate faith in man's ability to mould his own destiny:

"Where is the love, beauty and truth we seek
But in our mind? and if we were not weak
Should we be less in deed than in desire?" (174-6)

Julian emphasizes the same doctrine of intellectual malleability that Satan espouses in *Paradise Lost* (1667). He gives the mind something like the absolute status of being able to ordain and mould experience as Satan does here:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

(I, 254-255)²⁶

Yet Satan's lines have a much more resounding quality to them: we are aware of his status as leader; his rhetoric, while dubious in intent, is magnificent in effect. Julian's lines, by contrast, are ineffectual and insist too readily on the ease with which the gap between theory and reality can be bridged.

The Maniac's soliloquy illustrates the way in which Julian's belief in perfectibility must always be blocked by the uncontrollability of human emotion. The soliloquy emerges as an emblem of emotion in its purest form in that the poetry by insisting on and depicting prevailing disruption and agony so absolutely, but never commenting on its meaning, assumes the status of a scrupulous rendition of an unembellished reality. The Maniac becomes an archetype and his soliloquy brings various strands of experience together into a complex whole. The reader has to shift through the disjointedness of these strands and, as the Preface suggests, is invited to find within the Maniac's lines, something that he or she can identify with: 'the unconnected exclamations of his agony will perhaps be found a sufficient comment for the text of every heart.'²⁷ The Preface impresses because of its refusal to elaborate on emotional, rather than factual matters. When all is said and done, it might almost belong to another poem in the sense that its lucidity does not prepare us for the provisionality of what is to follow. We do not even know whether Shelley intended it to be read as a piece written by a third party or by himself. Earl Wasserman supports the former view,²⁸ while a later critic, Christine Gallant, takes the latter.²⁹ This

ambiguity is deliberately woven into the Preface as its author's tone remains stubbornly unidentifiable and points to Shelley's tendency to strip the reader of the assurances that a work of art might have.

The Preface also disorientates in its use of irony. The statements about Julian, for example, seem to admit, elusively but undeniably, a sense of something that goes against the grain of Julian's optimism. It is clear that the author knows more than either Julian or Maddalo - he discerns truths which cannot be glimpsed by the reader and manages to suggest, with irony and detachment, the undercurrents of a knowledge that could only have been gained with hindsight. Such knowledge is inherent in the suggestion that the final lines, while referring the reader to his own heart, also imply how the Maniac's plight might become the reader's too.

It is useful to compare *Julian and Maddalo* to Byron's *The Lament of Tasso*, which, as mentioned before, was an influence on Shelley's poem. Both works deal with tortured protagonists, but there is a much firmer sense of orientation in Byron's poem - both with regard to how to assess the speaker's state of mind and the meaning of the poem. As Charles Robinson has pointed out,³⁰ the Maniac's soliloquy rose out of an unrealised plan for a drama on Tasso Shelley was to have written. Tasso's life in imprisonment seems to have attracted Shelley because it presented a symbol of persecuted genius, genius hypersensitive and much like his own. As Timothy Clark remarks: 'Tasso's life ... became an instance of the dangers of excessive imagination.'³¹ In Shelley's fragment 'Song for "Tasso"' (first published in 1824) we can discern, in an embryonic form, the impassioned outpourings of the Maniac:

I LOVED - alas! our life is love;
But when we cease to breathe and move
I do suppose love ceases too ...
And still I love and still I think,

But strangely, for my heart can drink
The dregs of such despair, and live,
And love ... (1-3, 8-11)

The second extract might conceivably have been enlarged into the more melodramatic: 'I live to shew / How much men bear and die not!' (459-460).

Shelley has this to say about Byron's *Lament of Tasso*: 'those lines [Section 6, 149-173] [that describe] the youthful feelings of Tasso ... make my head wild with tears.' (To Lord Byron, 24 September 1817) ³² In Byron's Tasso there is a lucidity and objectivity that is absent from the Maniac's utterances. As Michael O'Neill puts it: 'Byron's Tasso is as declamatory and self-justifying as the Maniac, but where Shelley explores derangement, Byron allows his speaker to define his state of mind with robust common sense'. ³³ In Tasso's utterances there is a lucidity and objectivity that is absent from the Maniac's cries. Tasso can still step back and identify a situation while the Maniac has only a clouded sense of reality. In the following lines there is a simplicity and matter-of-factness that is reassuring in the face of the disorientation of madness:

Above me, hark! the long and maniac cry
Of minds and bodies in captivity.
And hark! the lash and the increasing howl,
And the half-inarticulate blasphemy!
There be some here with worse than frenzy foul,
Some who do still grad on the o'er-labour'd mind...

(65-70) ³⁴

Progression and logic are features of the writing and they betoken continuity and mental alacrity. By contrast, Shelley's depiction of madness is more mercurial:

I am mad, I fear,
My fancy is o'erwrought ... thou art not here ...
Pale art thou, 'tis most true ... but thou art gone,
Thy work is finished ... I am left alone! -

(394-397)

A passage such as this illustrates the way in which Shelley's poem thrives on its fidelity to a minutely accurate rendition of suffering as expressed in speech. Byron's poem, though emotional and intensely self-involved, still has about it the detached trappings of poetic speech. Byron, unlike Shelley, does not ask the reader to immerse himself in his utterances. The Maniac's utterances, on the other hand, can not be called detached if only because they burst upon the reader in the midst of the elegance and poise of the relation of Julian and Maddalo's argument. Shelley's decision to place the soliloquy where he does greatly contributes to the poem's efficacy. We are forced into digesting a mass of emotionally indistinct information that simulates reality in such a way as to suggest that reality is not open to the elucidative formulae and schematic approaches that characterise Julian and Maddalo's exchanges. The Maniac's soliloquy is successful because it pinpoints the futility of the attempt to construct a means of interpretation and explanation, yet concedes the overwhelming need to do so.

iv

Rosalind and Helen (1818), like *Julian and Maddalo*, is a conversation piece but is more overtly self-conscious in its readiness to find emblems. While the latter poem has moods that prevail against apparent ones, *Rosalind and Helen* is altogether less ambiguous and layered. Julian's statements, for example at the

start of the poem, contain intimations of an awareness not stated in language that can not be attributed to an immediate source (line 14 is an instance). In *Rosalind and Helen* emotion is conveyed directly, leaving no room for the displaced quality of suggestiveness that prevails in the other poem. The descriptive passages do not have the psychological reverberations of *Julian and Maddalo*. In this example, the poetry fixes on its object firmly and clearly:

And the birds that in the fountain dip
Their plumes, with fearless fellowship
Above and round him wheel and hover.
The fitful wind is heard to stir
One solitary leaf on high;
The chirping of the grasshopper
Fills every pause. There is emotion
In all that dwells at noontide here ...

(120-127)

The first three lines pinpoint with a degree of deliberation that, especially in the third line (123), limits rather than widens arenas of emotion. The next three lines reinforce this sense of exactness. 'The fitful wind is heard to stir / One solitary leaf on high', is evocative, but leaves too little to the imagination, despite echoing *Christabel* (1797).³⁵ The virtue of these lines is a realisation of experience that homes in on minute details precisely. However, in the light of this precision, the last sentence seems, in its context, more digressive than relevant, given that the passage has, by and large, eschewed an expressive approach in favour of a straightforwardly descriptive one. In *Julian and Maddalo*, on the other hand, Shelley does leave something to the imagination; his language amalgamates the real with the suggestive and what is articulated with what is not. The following

passage, by way of illustration, achieves its fertility by allowing the reader to discern the artful but unobtrusive marriage of emotion with the landscape:

the blue heavens were bare,
Stripped to their depths by the awakening North;
And, from the waves, sound like delight broke forth
Harmonizing with solitude, and sent
Into our hearts aërial merriment... (23-27)

It is the achievement of the poetry here simultaneously to offer the reader literal and metaphorical planes of meaning. The human response seems to flow from the physical manifestations of nature, manifestations that are represented by rawly realised states of being: barrenness ('bare' and 'stripped') and animation ('delight broke forth').

The earlier part of this first verse-paragraph suggests subtly how the full import of its meaning lies beyond the literalism that we are immediately confronted with:

Where 'twas our wont to ride while day went down.
This ride was my delight. (13-14).

The single phrase 'This ride was my delight' alerts the reader to an unaccountable residue of melancholy early on in the poem. On coming to these lines after a reading of the poem it is clear that these intimations only make sense when they are fitted into the wider context of the story of the Maniac and the way in which what he has said is, as it were, in the back of Julian's mind as he narrates past events but with his present sensibilities in a very different state to those that corresponded to this past period. What Vincent Newey has to say about the following lines (14-17) is relevant to this argument: "The *pleasure of believing*",

"as we *wish*": in this reticent yet definite acknowledgement of the gulf dividing desire and actuality ... we register an experienced voice and outlook that contrasts vividly with the younger Julian's eager declarations of the boundlessness of the soul.'³⁶ Perhaps, though, we should also take on board the possibility that Julian can at one and the same time be both experienced and innocent. It is possible that Newey may just be simplifying for the sake of constructing a chronological exactitude that the poem lacks.

The phrase 'as we wish our souls to be' (17) seems simple enough but is actually the first announcement in the poem of the latent core of suffering humans can be privy to because of the fact that, through the frustration of desire (and the Maniac exemplifies such frustration), our souls are *not* boundless. This graceful remark contains within it much larger issues than would appear, but, given the way in which Shelley has left it to one side, the impression it makes is almost one of an afterthought. In *Julian and Maddalo* Shelley suggests that the Maniac's presence underlines the early descriptive passages, comes into full focus in the middle of the poem, and remains teasingly within reach at the end.

The malady of the Maniac is that he is entrapped within a soul that dwells only on agony, but is also privy to a quantity of pain that might come from having a soul that *was* boundless. His sensibilities are finely adjusted to the registration of pain in all its manifestations but not to pleasure.

In this passage of Byron's *Manfred* (1817) the hero of the drama articulates a similar desire for 'boundlessness':

Oh, that I were
The viewless spirit of a lovely sound,
A living voice, a breathing harmony,
A bodiless enjoyment - born and dying
With the blest tone which made me!

(I. ii. 52-56)³⁷

Manfred yearns for the ethereal quality of the abstraction of a mere sound or sensation but he realises that such a state could be only momentary and fragile - 'born and dying / With the blest tone which made me!'. This liberation from the body's restrictiveness echoes a passage from Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814):

To have a Body (this our vital Frame
With shrinking sensibility endued,
And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)
And to the elements surrender it
As if it were a spirit! (IV, 520-524) ³⁸

Shelley also echoes this passage in *Alastor*: 'As if that frail and wasted human form, / Had been an elemental god.' (350-351) In *Alastor*, the Poet's surrender of himself to the elements involves a process of transmutation that leads to the disintegration of his human characteristics. By contrast, in *The Excursion* we have a wilful surrender that will enlarge sensibility. Julian's impulse towards the realisation of 'boundlessness', though not realised in himself, is manifested in the Maniac by an enlargement of sensibilities that is crippling rather than liberating.

Julian and Maddalo's discussion is always characterised by an apprehension of reality that is comfortably theoretical. Maddalo is more fully aware of this than Julian and says at one point:

"my judgement will not bend
To your opinion, though I think you might
Make such a system refutation-tight
As far as words go." (192-195)

The concise phrase "As far as words go" indicates that Maddalo is only too keenly aware of how insufficient words are as instruments with which to penetrate the core of human nature. The whole tone in these lines suggests Maddalo's indulgence of Julian; it also suggests that such indulgence would not for a moment admit compromise. In the lines "though I think you might / Make such a system refutation-tight" there is a contrast between the accommodating casualness of 'though I think you might' and the firm grasp of 'refutation-tight'. The rigour of Maddalo's language reflects a similarly rigorous intellect fully aware of where the divisions between theory and reality fall. Julian's words, it is suggested, mirror only a limited version of reality, not one that takes in the vagaries of existence. It is significant also that, after the encounter with the Maniac, the argument between them is 'quite forgot' (520) which seems to suggest that the Maniac's soliloquy illustrates how the reality that it represents is too sprawling and various to be categorised in the fixed positions of an argument.

The Fourth Canto of Byron's *Child Harold* (1818) has a more ruthless insistence on reality than Julian and Maddalo's argument. The opening lines display a nonchalant awareness of the way in which man's condition is characterised by opposition:

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;

A palace and a prison on each hand ...

(1-2)³⁹

There is in this view of Venice a glimpse both of the high and the low, the romantic and the earthy. We discern also the idealism of Julian and the pessimism of Maddalo. For Julian Venice represents an earthly 'paradise of exiles'. For him the view that makes the strongest impression is that of the mountains and the sunset. Maddalo also appreciates the beauty of Venice but the view is ruined by the madhouse - an emblem of inflexibility.

Child Harold's Fourth Canto is insistent and reductive in its representation of suffering:

Who loves, raves - 'tis youth's frenzy - but the cure
Is bitterer still; as charm by charm unwinds...

(1099-1100) ⁴⁰

This suggests that ultimately we are victims of an uncontrollable passion: 'Who loves, raves - 'tis youth's frenzy'. The stoical assertiveness does not mask an underlying germ of contempt. The speaker is detached in his observance of human nature: from his viewpoint love is merely a form of madness. Towards the end of his life Shelley admitted that love was potentially as destructive a force as hate: 'love far more than hatred - has been to me ... the source of all sort[s] of mischief.' (To Mary Shelley, 15 August 1821) ⁴¹ The possibility that the import of this statement may be true is what gnaws at the Maniac's mind. He cannot reconcile the esteem in which he holds his own notion of love with the negativity of its ill-effects:

"It were

A cruel punishment for one most cruel,
If such can love, to make that love the fuel
Of the mind's hell; hate, scorn, remorse, despair"...

(438-441)

The lines seem to transform Julian's notion of intellectual freedom (lines 174 to 176) into a twisted version so that, in Milton's Satan's words, the heaven of love becomes a hell.

Maddalo's awareness of how pleasure and pain can overlap prepares him for either's transmutation into the other. The Maniac and Julian, on the other hand,

see the two as fixed and separate; their apprehension of reality is too simplistic. Julian is keen on finding convenient metaphors or emblems that make their objects too subservient to the argument that he is addressing rather than accurately reflecting it. His romanticism impinges on his grasp upon the real:

And whilst I waited with his child I played;
A lovelier toy sweet Nature never made ...

(143-144)

The sentimentality that is implicit here ('A lovelier toy') points to Julian's readiness to mould the child into a symbol. Maddalo's child is pure, but Julian bestows on this purity an artificial function - namely, that of illustrating an argument.

To some extent Julian imposes a preconceived idea of reality onto what he sees, rather than making his observations in the light of the experience being considered. When Maddalo's cynicism proves too unpalatable, Julian's response illustrates his own attempts to shirk away from opinions that he finds he cannot really empathise with:

I recall
The sense of what he said, although I mar
The force of his expressions.

(130-132)

'I recall / The sense of what he said' has about it only a dim perception of Maddalo's import, as if Julian were hesitating, while the latter half of this sentence replaces such hesitance with a more unequivocal deliberation. These lines come immediately after Maddalo has finished speaking. Julian, as narrator, has a greater hold than Maddalo on our sympathies and a comment such as this

capitalises on this fact. Because Julian's comments reflect his own subjectivity they must necessarily make his narrative more indeterminate, while offering the reader the illusion that such a narrative proceeds in a manner that attunes neither more nor less significance to Julian's statements. We look to Julian for answers that might align the Maniac's soliloquy with his arguments with Maddalo, and explain the relation between the two. By the poem's end it is clear that Julian does not have recourse to these answers and that he is too immersed in the memory of the events of the poem for him to achieve the sufficient distance from them that might make an opinion more forthcoming.

The lines that come immediately after this sentence reflect Julian's preoccupation with the need for emblems:

The broad star

Of day meanwhile had sunk behind the hill
And the black bell became invisible
And the red tower looked grey, and all between
The churches, ships and palaces were seen
Huddled in gloom; - into the purple sea
The orange hues of heaven sunk silently.

(132-138)

This passage would seem to be a straightforward description and nothing more, yet these lines ask to be read in a certain way, one that allows the passage's gentle inevitability to accumulate into a total effect of dissolution. The passage forms one perfectly paced sentence. It begins with a simple statement ('The broad star / Of day meanwhile had sunk behind the hill') which alerts the reader to the presence of the accompanying landscape. It comes as something of a mild surprise to be reminded of it so that the words take on the air of a commentary. It is as if, with the pause in the argument, there is an accompanying pause in nature.

This echoic quality is now given further resonance in the next lines, but the natural change is slightly differently phrased, as a new way of seeing such change comes into being, one that takes in the uncertainty of what it means to interpret: 'And the black bell became invisible / And the red tower looked grey'. The first line marries the fact of the bell's invisibility with a lingering sub-text that incorporates the bell's latent presence. The second line is more indistinct, conscious of the ambiguity of reality. Then we have something of a suspension that gives the verse time to breathe ('and all between / The churches, ships and palaces were seen / Huddled in gloom'), while still reiterating the theme of subsidence and suggesting a retreat into darkness. The final words (' - into the purple sea / The orange hues of heaven sunk silently ') round off the passage sharply, suddenly focusing the writing into a clause that has about it an air of finality. The adjectives 'purple' and 'orange' ask to be read together in the same way in which the sea and the hues of heaven seem to merge together. The final alliteration of 'sunk silently' is both clinching and hushed. It is Julian's descriptive method that gives it this resonant, multi-layered quality. It is hard not to read the lines in a way other than one that acknowledges that the narrative is as much a commentary on the psychological significance of a description ^{as a description.} But to acknowledge this is to lend the verse an objectivity that must inevitably be frustrated by the provisionality of Julian's status as narrator. We cannot help but expect from Julian more guidance than is forthcoming as to how to interpret what he describes. In the passage above Julian's narrative reflects his emblematic approach; the difficulty here is that the narrative both conveys Julian's skill and illustrates the subjectivity of his perceptions. And such subjectivity cannot yield the kind of meaning that the reader may be tempted to look for within it.

The Maniac's soliloquy is more overtly provisional and indeterminate. At times the soliloquy is lucid and coherent, at others confused and vehement. In these lines the Maniac insists that he is rational:

Believe that I am ever still the same
In creed as in resolve, and what may tame
My heart, must leave the understanding free ...

(358-360)

There is something unreal in these claims, simply because the Maniac is not in possession of his sanity. Richard Holmes has remarked that '[the Maniac's] resolution and ... lucidity never lasts for very long, and in the end he exhausts himself'.⁴² However, the utterances that do betoken lucidity make it harder to evaluate the Maniac's emotional significance. The Maniac offers both notions of order and chaos; part of his mysteriousness lies in his own lack of self-knowledge - and this is disorientating for the reader. As the Maniac's soliloquy proceeds we begin to discern the provisional nature of what he says, subject as it is to alterations and moods that swing violently between calmness and anger, longings for death and longings for redemption. The following passage displays an awareness of the way in which emotional states are as much defined by their susceptibility to change as by intrinsic characteristics:

There is one road
To peace and that is truth, which follow ye!
Love sometimes leads astray to misery.
Yet think not though subdued - and I may well
Say that I am subdued - that the full Hell
Within me would infect the untainted breast
Of sacred nature with its own unrest;
As some perverted beings think to find
In scorn or hate a medicine for the mind
Which scorn or hate have wounded - o how vain!

The dagger heals not but may rend again

(347-357)

The passage opens with a declamatory flourish typical of the Maniac's soliloquy (see, for example, lines 315 to 316 or lines 459 to 460). The portentous quality of the verse comes from the sense of an announcement being made as the Maniac lays down the parameters of his own moral universe. The curious thing about the first two lines is the way in which the grandiose tone implies the Maniac speaks from a position of power whereas he is actually impotent. The next line has a peculiar resonance if only because its awareness of change is so understated. In the light of the Maniac's overwhelming misery the line reflects the Maniac's own oblique grasp of reality. In the next lines (350-353) the Maniac's consciousness of 'Hell' and the 'untainted breast / Of sacred nature' is characterised by the realisation that, for him, the purity implicit in the 'untainted breast / Of sacred nature' cannot remain intact anymore as his own apprehension of 'Hell' is too absolute. The verse flows with an inevitability that signals his own resignation. The final line in this extract again has that quality of making an announcement: 'The dagger heals not but may rend again'. It eloquently illustrates the notion that the Maniac's continuing vulnerability will not be accompanied by the possibility of any accompanying therapy.

The Maniac uses language to articulate pain - it also becomes a crutch with which he can prop up his fragmented mind. The words that he utters thus become, on one level, meaningless in that the need to utter words takes on a greater significance than the meaning of the words themselves. He uses language to fill in the void left by the absence of his lover and the absence of the person that he once directed all his emotional and intellectual energies towards. This extract from Shelley's 'On Love' (1818) analyses what happens when the power to love dies: 'So soon as this want or power [of loving] is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what he

once was. --' 43 The Maniac has not lost the power of loving but he has no object on which to project this love and this loss leads to his mental disfiguration.

The mental disembodiment of the Maniac is anticipated in the physical picture that is presented of him in lines 273 to 279:

There the poor wretch was sitting mournfully
Near a piano, his pale fingers twined
One with the other, and the ooze and wind
Rushed through an open casement, and did sway
His hair, and starred it with the brackish spray;
His head was leaning on a music book,
And he was muttering, and his lean limbs shook ...

'His pale fingers twined / One with the other' suggests the way in which the Maniac's mind is similarly tied down, always harbouring on the same thoughts and unable to break free of them. The next lines present a picture of natural inhospitality that threatens to puncture the Maniac's body. There is an impression of careless violence in the alliterative 'and did sway / His hair, and starred it with the brackish spray'. This also recalls these lines from the start of the poem: '- for the winds drove / The living spray along the sunny air / Into our faces' (21-23). The echo suggests that the effusiveness of natural joy might, at a given moment, be replaced by elemental nihilism, as in the violent image of the later lines (276-7). The final lines (278-279) are simple, matter-of-fact and deliberate but this very absence of elaboration points to the Maniac's stark indifference to his own welfare.

The lines that follow the Maniac's soliloquy (511-546) have the effect of making concrete the suffering that has been related; there is a reemergence into reality, but a reality that now seems to reflect, admittedly in a diluted form, the Maniac's utterances. Maddalo's comment ("Most wretched men / Are cradled

into poetry by wrong, / They learn in suffering what they teach in song" (544-546)) strips poetry of its potential for affirmation, despite the sense of learning in 'teach'. This remark, coming where it does, is like a quiet but clinching confirmation of the truth of Maddalo's philosophy. We sense that Julian cannot, and will not, object to it. Instead he distances himself from the remark by reverting to the now hollow seeming pleasures of Venice. Maddalo implies that poetry's mimetic function only takes in one half of human experience. It is an attitude Shelley fostered at times and reemerges in the person of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*: "I / Have suffered what I wrote". (278-279) However, it is also an attitude that he is at pains to contradict in these passages of the *Defence of Poetry* (1821): 'Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed' ⁴⁴ ; 'Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.' ⁴⁵ Here the therapeutic nature of poetry is stressed but the fact that Shelley also voices, through Maddalo, more negative opinions of the matter testifies to how the poem is a 'debate with himself.' ⁴⁶

The penultimate verse-paragraph unveils Julian's attempts at shirking self-knowledge, or rather knowledge that is unpalatable. It is ironic that in the phrase 'And make me know myself' (561) Julian articulates a desire, the full meaning of which he does not fully comprehend. Julian entertains notions of self-knowledge, but this comes across, after the tumultuous effect of the soliloquy, as perfunctory and contrived. 'And make me know myself', like the earlier 'as we wish our souls to be' (17), contains issues within it whose complexity and unfathomability are hardly suggested by the casualness with which the phrase is inserted, in the manner almost of a parenthesis. The complex meaning and the simplified tone point to the opacity that surrounds self perception.

The final verse-paragraph reaches a level of narrative concision that blends subtlety and economy to a remarkable degree. In it we learn of Julian's return to Venice and his meeting with Maddalo's daughter, now grown up. The whole

paragraph is delicately aware of the nature of change and how it alters circumstances to the extent that they lose signposts of familiarity. To Julian, Venice had meant Maddalo and his 'wit / And subtle talk'. (559-560) Maddalo has now departed to Armenia and what might have been a physical manifestation of his presence - his dog - has died. But his daughter - now grown up - is there and seems to be the antidote to Maddalo's pessimism. Julian's description is graceful and stresses enchantment:

His child had now become
A woman; such as it has been my doom
To meet with few, a wonder of this earth,
Where there is little of transcendent worth,
Like one of Shakespeare's women: kindly she
And with a manner beyond courtesy
Received her father's friend ... (588-594)

But Julian's phrases have about them a world-weariness that his euphoria cannot manage to hide. 'Such as it has been my doom / To meet with few, a wonder of this earth, / Where there is little of transcendent worth' are lines that anticipate the abruptness of the poem's close. Julian has not met many like her because it is a 'cold world' (617). The phrase 'a wonder of this earth' is paralleled and undermined by 'Where there is little of transcendent worth'. This last line is final to the point of inflexibility. Maddalo's daughter is 'Like one of Shakespeare's women', perhaps Miranda or Portia, both characters with associations of enchantment and magic. She is, therefore, worthy of fiction, yet her kindness is down-to-earth as she receives Julian with 'a manner *beyond* courtesy'. (594, my italics) This phrase suggests that what she offers Julian is something that 'courtesy' only insufficiently defines. Despite the tangibility of this aura she

remains, given the very fleetingness of her appearance, a tantalizing figure who does not deliver the clarity that this tangibility promises.

Maddalo's daughter speaks of the fate of the Maniac and his Lady's return in a parenthetical but nonetheless exact manner:

"but that then

The Lady who had left him, came again.
Her mien had been imperious, but she now
Looked meek - perhaps remorse had brought her low.
Her coming made him better, and they stayed
Together at my father's - for I played
As I remember with the lady's shawl -
I might be six years old - but after all
She left him" ... (598-606)

There is something hurried, and the more intense because of that, in the rhythm of these lines, as if Maddalo's daughter is reluctant to dwell on the details of the encounter. 'Her mien had been imperious, but she now / Looked meek - perhaps remorse had brought her low' is a couplet of great economy that imperceptibly oscillates between different emotional countenances and the final aside, 'perhaps remorse had brought her low', suggests what could be tremendous emotion if only because this line is so understated and thrown away. The lines 'for I played / As I remember with the lady's shawl' create, for a moment, a carefree atmosphere that suggests a moment of harmony between the Maniac and the Lady. But this is short lived as 'after all / She left him'.

The final lines of the poem are both illuminating and obscure, exact and open-ended. They contain unlimited arenas of meaning that readers will want to narrow down in order to find out what really happened. This information, however, is not forthcoming. We have to fill in the gap with our own surmises.

What Shelley offers is a mode of indeterminacy that is highly eloquent and elaborate in its depiction of reticence:

"Something within that interval which bore
The stamp of *why* they parted, *how* they met:
Yet if thine aged eyes disdain to wet
Those wrinkled cheeks with youth's remembered tears,
Ask me no more, but let the silent years
Be closed and ceared over their memory
As yon mute marble where their corpses lie."
I urged and questioned still, she told me how
All happened - but the cold world shall not know.

(609-617)

The first line begins with an equivocation '*Something* within that interval' (my italics) and leads into further abstractions that tease the reader with the suggestion that these abstractions might become details. However, this possibility melts into an impassioned plea for silence that mingles age and youth in such a way as to bring out the full extent of Julian's decrepitude, in itself something of a surprise. The emphasis on silence - 'silent years', 'mute marble' - hints at language's inadequacy as Maddalo's daughter's request takes on a liturgical quality of roundedness: ""but let the silent years / Be closed and ceared over their memory / As yon mute marble where their corpses lie."" The final line's intense distillation of meaning comes as a shock as we, for the first time, learn of the couple's deaths. Nothing more is said about this, as Julian ends the poem in a dismissive and curious manner. Shelley wants us to notice this note of abrupt incompleteness. Information is withheld not because Shelley is negligent but because this withholding becomes a means with which to admit that he has no means of resolving dilemmas that the Maniac and his soliloquy have created.

Neither Julian, Maddalo, nor Maddalo's daughter can offer a bridge that would allow the reader to traverse the gulf that separates the opacity of the human condition from the relative transparency of poetry. The truncated quality of the end suggests that poetry itself is inadequate even to encompass such opacity, let alone explain it. Instead the poem's end achieves a kind of resonance attributable not to elucidation but to the refusal to elucidate, not to the fact that questions are answered but to the fact that they are articulated. But this articulation is, in itself, elucidatory if only because it is so eloquently executed. The next work I examine - *The Cenci* (1819) - is similarly uncompromising in its intellectual honesty.

*The Cenci***Moral Ambivalence and Self-Knowledge**

The Cenci (1819) has, at its heart, a journey into the centre of the human psyche which precipitates its heroine's fall from grace into moral and emotional myopia. During this journey some of the deepest of human fears are revealed in the person of Beatrice as she is conducted towards the 'darkness of the abyss', as Shelley puts it in the Preface to the play.¹ In this respect the play shares with *Julian and Maddalo* (1819) a similar insistence on the nature of what is psychologically disruptive. The Maniac of the poem is presented to the reader in a state of indistinct and fluctuating mental equilibrium. The changing states of his mind are vividly portrayed. Similarly, Beatrice's internal make-up, with all its susceptibility to change and disruption, is what Shelley asks the reader to latch onto in his play.

Like *Julian and Maddalo*, Shelley's play also adopts an austere and clinical style that Shelley thought to be more conducive to the expression of dramatic passion: 'I have avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry'.² Shelley gravitates towards Wordsworth's view of poetry as expressed in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): '[The first volume of these poems] ... was published, as an experiment ... to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation ... [poetic] pleasure may be imparted'.³ Shelley's statement on the matter makes a formal bow to Wordsworth: 'I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men.'⁴ This 'familiar' style signals the work's greater realism, as Shelley eschews the poetic style of *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) - the

tragedy's stylistic and philosophical counterpart. As Carlos Baker puts it, Shelley seeks to depict 'what is' as opposed to 'what might be.'⁵

The central problem of the play revolves around how the reader is to evaluate Beatrice's moral status. It is impossible to arrive at a definitive interpretation of her character that will place her within the confines of a simple and clear-cut morality. Shelley's achievement here is to present his heroine *whole*. We are allowed to step inside her mind and experience her reactions to her plight with unsurpassed intensity. It is difficult to judge Beatrice simply because we identify with her so completely; fully to exonerate her or fully to condemn her demands an objective framework that we are simply not given. This deliberate blurring of objectivity is Shelley's means of involving the reader in the assessment and indeed recreation of the moral universe he sets up. Shelley presents us with his drama, then detaches himself from its meanings by involving his readers in acts of interpretative evaluation that he himself can not provide given that his own objectivity is complete. This lends the play its air of indeterminacy. Earl Wasserman also sees this difficulty as intentional: 'That we have been baffled in our efforts to make ... simplistic evaluations of Beatrice is not, as has been frequently concluded, Shelley's failure or even his confusion of objective, but the actual fulfillment of his goal.'⁶ Shelley's indeterminate presentation of Beatrice is something that the reader has to unravel for himself, in much the same way as *Julian and Maddalo* suggested that a definitive meaning for the poem could only be found in the reader himself: 'the unconnected exclamations of his agony will perhaps be found a sufficient comment for the text of every heart.'⁷ This transference of the interpretative initiative onto the reader is directly linked to Shelley's essential view of dramatic writing as stated in the Preface to the play: 'The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself.'⁸

But, as so often with Shelley's Prefaces, his tone of authorial lucidity prepares the reader for a clear-cut piece of literature that is not forthcoming. Shelley's view of Beatrice in the Preface does not invite any hesitance in our assessment of her act of 'retaliation' against her father. Such retaliation is clearly wrong:

Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes.⁹

The last sentence, with its implied connection with Christian sentiment (for a similar instance of this Shelley's *Essay on Christianity* (probably 1817) provides an example: 'The absurd and execrable doctrine of vengeance seems to have been contemplated in all its shapes by this great moralist [Jesus Christ] with the profoundest disapprobation'¹⁰), is absolute and uncompromising, so much so that Stuart Curran assumes that Shelley is in fact talking about the historical Beatrice, rather than Shelley's creation: 'Shelley here, it must be emphasised, is referring to the Beatrice of history; his premises are inadequate to encompass the character whom he created.'¹¹ It is tempting to agree with Curran; if this is the case it would allow us to consider the Beatrice of the play, as opposed to the historical Beatrice, in a light that wasn't as judgemental as that of the above extract. In the play the reader's overbearing urge to identify with her and sympathise with her act of 'retaliation' must, however, eventually be subjugated to the fact that Beatrice does finally dispense with moral imperatives - a fact that leads to the need to judge her, in spite of her sympathetic quality. Thus we can only identify with her up to a certain point. Beyond that her actions are at the best questionable and at the worst immoral. In addition, because there is no unambiguously good character in the play who is also fully developed we seize on

Beatrice in a manner that brings into sharper focus the fact of her defilement and the horror of this than her subsequent degeneration into moral degradation: the part of the play that contains the greatest moral cruxes.

ii

As Stuart Curran puts it 'Within the perverse framework of this tragedy, to act is to commit evil.'¹² Within this climate of moral perversion, it becomes harder and harder, and in the end impossible, for Beatrice to live up to the Promethean ideal that Shelley articulates in the Preface ('the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance'¹³) and in *Prometheus Unbound* ('I wish no living thing to suffer pain.' (I. 305)) In addition, it is also her mind that is unhinged by the Count's act of incestuous rape. Prometheus can still say in the midst of his plight 'Yet I am king over myself'. (I. 492) His mind has not been violated. Beatrice's mental freedom, however, is taken away from her. In other words the external world of evil impinges on the internal world of Beatrice's mind, whereas Prometheus, in the midst of external devastation, preserves the inner sanctum of well-being: 'Not me, within whose mind sits peace serene / As light in the sun, throned'. (I. 430-1)

However, in *The Cenci*, not only is Beatrice's antagonist, that is, her father, corrupt, so too is the very fabric of the ruling order which she repeatedly asks help from. Wasserman brings this point into focus: 'What [is] ... revealed is the moral invalidity of theology and the legal system, upon both of which Beatrice has modelled her actions'.¹⁴ Earlier Wasserman makes a point that anticipates this: 'there consistently hovers over *The Cenci* [the] ... intimation that theology is invented for the sake of human oppression and that the God of Christianity may be only the imaginary projection of a Count Cenci'.¹⁵

Shelley makes explicit this connection between the expediency of oppression and Christianity in this passage from *The Moral Teaching of Jesus Christ* (1815-1817?): '[Christianity] ... is the strongest ally and bulwark of that system of successful force and fraud and of the selfish passions from which it has derived its origin and permanence'.¹⁶ Certainly in the play itself Count Cenci and the Pope appear as rivals rather than standing together in any hierarchal system in which virtue is the criterion for moral superiority. Cenci's 'I little thought he [the Pope] should outwit me so!' (I. i. 20) is revealing in its nonchalance and absence of any sign of appropriate deference. Camillo's later lines about the Pope, by their implicit but nonetheless insistent suggestiveness, cement notions that offer authorial modes of action as echoing and endorsing paternal ones:

He holds it of most dangerous example
In aught to weaken the paternal power,
Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own.

(II. ii. 54-6)

Wherever Beatrice turns, then, she meets with the 'prismatic and many sided mirror'¹⁷ of corruption. A line from *Charles The First* (1822), 'If God be good, wherefore should this be evil?' (Scene I, 21), can in some ways stand over *The Cenci* as an ironic gloss on the foundations of evil in the play, for throughout it Shelley suggests that God is *not* good and actually on Cenci's side:

Aye, as the word of God; whom here I call
To witness that I speak the sober truth; -
And whose most favouring Providence was shewn
Even in the manner of their [his sons] deaths ...

Christofano

Was stabbed in error by a jealous man,
Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival;
All in the self-same hour of the same night;
Which shews that Heaven has special care of me.

(I. iii. 55-8, 61-5, my italics)

James Rieger goes so far as to see Cenci, God and the Pope as three strands of the same thread of immorality: 'The tragedy's great developmental irony is Beatrice's growing awareness, uncompleted until the moment that the herdsman waits for her around the corner, that Cenci, Clement, and Almighty God form a triple entente.'¹⁸ Without the presence, then, of an unambiguous moral framework to fall back on it is harder to view anybody's actions within a clear light. Cenci's legacy is the predominant motif in the play, whether it takes the form of his speeches, or the form of resemblances that characters' utterances begin to make to Cenci's linguistic traits. For example, Lucretia, the most passive character in the play is given to utter the phrase 'Would it were done!' (IV. iii. 38) which is a direct remembrance of Cenci's 'Would that it were done!' (II. i. 193). Shelley wants us to perceive this resemblance, as it betokens the way in which Cenci's evil has filtered imperceptibly into the other characters' psyches. This fact is unignorable and makes it difficult to distinguish the characters' actions as clearly their own and not merely the derivative of an initial spark of evil. Thus all actions in the play can be seen, on one level, to be derived from the principal act of the play, Cenci's rape of Beatrice. All that goes before the rape leads to it and all that comes after derives from it. The impact that the rape has on Beatrice is so great as to lead to the circumstances that create the remaining events of the play: Cenci's murder and the trial of Beatrice. In addition, Beatrice's rape, and its aftermath, call into question the larger issue of characterisation within the play. The difficulty the reader has in evaluating her

character and its various transformations makes itself felt only after she has been raped. This difficulty also accounts for the difficulty of the play.

iii

The opening of *The Cenci*, which perhaps takes its cue from the opening of Webster's *The White Devil* (1610-12?)¹⁹ in that it has a similar sense of rushing in headlong without an initial setting of the scene, immediately sets up the expectation of a kinship between moral expediency and religion. In particular the first line of the play suggests the way in which a 'murder' is just another item on someone's agenda, a 'matter' for merely administrative concern: 'That matter of the murder is hushed up'. (I. i. 1) The stress on the unreality of this proceeding is indicative of the way in which the proponents of justice operate. We are prepared in the very first line of the play for the picture that Camillo (the same speaker) paints of the Pope in Act V:

He looked as calm and keen as is the engine
Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself
From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,
A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.

(V. iv. 2-5)

In the first extract, in embryonic form, are the beginnings of what will later be elaborated as both the Count's and the law's inhumanity. The Pope is not, in fact, 'a man', just as Cenci admits he is not in these lines:

I do not feel as if I were a man,
But like a fiend appointed to chastise

The offences of some unremembered world.

(IV. i. 160-2)

The phrase 'of some unremembered world' alerts the reader to Cenci's detachment: he serves another existence, as removed as an abstraction but as real as the power that the Count wields.

Camillo's first speech, then, immediately strikes a balance between the need for judgement and the overwhelming subservience to expediency that must necessarily undermine and distort judgement. His closing two lines ('As manifold and hideous as the deeds / Which you scarce hide from men's revolted eyes'(13-4)) suggest ineffectuality, in that the terms used are understated as if Camillo here gives the Count's barbarity an edge of civility. His words are a little muted by the fact that the Count is there beside him. Both 'manifold' and 'revolted' are words that invite stronger words that are not forthcoming. The lines finally give the impression of petering out in a mood of partial acquiescence. Even at the start of the play the moral signposts are clouded over and unclear.

Cenci is not simply a straightforward monster. He is himself a cunning and masterful creator of linguistic methods. His language builds its effects with a subtlety that suggests something that transcends mere evil:

True, I was happier than I am, while yet
Manhood remained to act the thing I thought;
While lust was sweeter than revenge; and now
Invention palls: - Aye, we must all grow old -
And but that there remains a deed to act
Whose horror might make sharp an appetite
Duller than mine - I'd do, - I know not what.

(I. i. 96-102)

It is worth pausing here to offer a paraphrase of the passage in order to bring out the psychological subtlety of the writing. Cenci says that when he was a young man he was happier than he now is because he could turn his thoughts into actions; and suggests that pleasures of the flesh were of more appeal than revenge. Now, however, he admits that his vitality has waned because of age and decides he will replace it with something else: namely, the execution of a deed that will be so horrible as to reawaken that vitality. He ends by admitting, however, that he does not know what the deed will be. Shelley compresses all this meaning into a passage of great economical clout that nonetheless does not sacrifice stylistic assurance for the sake of brevity. Rather the meaning dictates the form; the passage's power lies in its winding compressiveness and concentration. The way that Shelley has decked out the passage with tantalizing pauses and half-realised reticence makes Cenci's evil the more disquieting and compelling. The phrase 'and now / Invention palls', for example, allows the verse to subside into a quietness that is eerie. What comes next - 'Aye, we must all grow old' - impresses because of its sense of false self-effacement. Coming where it does the phrase builds its effects with telling power. Cenci, of course, does grow old but with age no suggestion is forthcoming of any corresponding lessening of his capacity for cruelty. The pause before 'I know not what' also confirms Cenci's ability to pry on his interlocutor's mind with a deceptive ease and effectiveness. He lets both the reader and the person he is addressing wait.

Cenci is indeed something of a supreme manipulator of language. Of all the characters in the play Cenci is unique in that he controls thought and language, rather than letting them control him. In the following passage he builds his effects with careful deliberation:

If, when a parent from a parent's heart
Lifts from this earth to the great father of all
A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,

And when he rises up from dreaming it;
One supplication, one desire, one hope,
That he would grant a wish for his two sons
Even all that he demands in their regard ...

(I. iii. 22-28)

Cenci is here putting on his 'public' voice and, in doing so, expectations are aroused in the reader of a display of a moral propriety that is not forthcoming. He builds up a web of ironies with benign ease and fosters a mood of pleasant anticipation. This is then dashed by the announcement of his sons' deaths, which is nonetheless perfectly in accord with his phraseology, while contradicting in meaning the import of this passage, which is, apparently, one of benevolence and well-being. The first line, with its insistence on the word 'parent' suggests a liturgical harmoniousness that is echoed in the repetitive movement of 'One supplication, one desire, one hope'. Similarly the lines 'both when he lays him down to sleep, / And when he rises up from dreaming it' paint a picture of fully-rounded methodicalness and a quiet dutifulness. The whole piece, with its quasi-Biblical air, is cunningly strategical and leaves the reader in the expectation of an emergence of moral equilibrium. Everyone is taken in, except Beatrice, who makes a comment that immediately alerts the reader to the dissonance that results from the clash between the Count's manner and his meaning. This clash is characteristic of Shelley's refusal to offer his reader objectivity as a means of interpreting his main characters. We too are taken in by the Count so that, as readers, we lack the same moral assurances and certainties that the characters in the play lack. We become involved in the meaning of the events of the play as do the characters within it. We face the same dilemmas and difficulties and our reactions are taken up in the person of Beatrice, a character who voices the inner fears, insecurities and anxieties of the reader. Beatrice thus becomes the mouthpiece of both the audience and the reader, in a similar way to which the

reader of *The Triumph of Life* assumes the viewpoint of the narrator. It is therefore impossible to judge Beatrice without in some way bringing our own fundamental beliefs into the very arena of morality in which such judgements might reside. This inseparability is Shelley's method of 'teaching the human heart ... the knowledge of itself' ²⁰ and is one of the main strands of his method of indeterminacy. In judging Beatrice we must also judge ourselves.

Cenci's command of language confirms that, more often than not, language is a *distorted* transmitter of meaning in the play. There is an insistence on how words often limit and control thought, rather than liberate it. As Orsino puts it in Act V: 'Shall I be the slave / Of ... what? A word?' (V. i. 98-99) Language has a heavy responsibility, insubstantial and impotent though it is; it can make all the difference yet also, paradoxically, only further emphasize intransigence and inflexibility. Beatrice's lines after she has been raped point to the parody of experience that words represent:

Of all words,
That minister to mortal intercourse,
Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell
My misery ...

(III. i. 111-4)

This implies that to use *any* word would be equally ineffectual: language is relegated to a position of insignificance, and speech, with its insistence on sequential logic, would betoken an internal order that is simply not there. As Ronald Tetreault puts it: '[Beatrice is] poised between a language that controls her and a troubled awareness of its consequences'. ²¹

Shelley's philosophy of language in the play takes as its starting point this passage from his own prose piece *Speculations on Metaphysics* (1817) which stresses the way in which words are only substitutional in their recreation of the

mental condition: 'Words are as the instruments of mind whose capacities it becomes the Metaphysician accurately to know, but they are not mind, nor are they portions of mind.'²² This philosophy informs the play and, in particular, characterises many of Beatrice's utterances. These utterances derive their power from this notion of the sheer unparaphrasability of experience.

A passage from *Marino Faliero* (1820) also echoes *The Cenci's* view of language. Byron's play, as Charles Robinson has pointed out²³, is similar to Shelley's in that it too is an historical drama that has at its centre sexual violation. In this passage there is a common interest in the discrepancy between action and its expression:

... the die was thrown

When first I listen'd to your treason. - Start not!

That is the word; I cannot shape my tongue

To syllable black deeds into smooth names,

Though I be wrought on to commit them.

(III. i. 55-59)²⁴

The passage is characterised by the way in which this discrepancy is palpable and perceivable. The Doge's words impress with their insistent drive towards truth. His stoical matter-of-factness makes no concessions to ambiguity or the veil of distortion. The phrase 'smooth names' effectively suggests complicity's habit of twisting truth to its own ends, but with consummate discretion. However, in *The Cenci* language has much more of a foothold within all the characters' beings: it *directs* their actions as much as reflects on them. The Doge's expression here of the discrepancy between the act and the verbalisation of it is far too absolute to be uttered by anybody in *The Cenci*. Nobody enjoys such objectivity and independence. Instead language is either being moulded into an instrument by

which truth can be perverted or is remoulding a character's thoughts. The note of misrepresentation is struck here:

and we trust

Imagination with such phantasies

As the tongue dares not *fashion* into words,

Which have no words, their horror makes them dim

To the mind's eye. -

(II. ii. 83-87, my italics)

The word 'fashion' suggests tempering, making more tame - almost an automatic reaction to the nature of 'such phantasies' - in addition to meaning 'making up'. The discrepancy between mental creation and verbal utterance results in the need to control and rein in. The nature of such phantasies is suggested in another passage from *Speculations on Metaphysics*:

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being, from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections, and, in dim perspective, their shadowy hopes and fears, - all that they dare not, or that daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open eyes of day. ²⁵

The emphasis is on how the 'picture' that is 'presented' is self-contained and prevails from early on: this internal potential for what is latently disquieting is available to everybody, though counterbalanced by the need to keep thought hidden and concealed.

The impotence of language in the play is engendered by the climate of existentialist unknowingness in it. Beatrice's final cry from the heart in Act V is a clear instance of an occasion in the play when a character looks into the 'abyss' and confronts the inner emptiness of a godless universe:

If there should be
No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;
The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!

(V. iv. 57-59)

The nihilistic vision that this speech contemplates, while remoulding Claudio's speech from *Measure for Measure* (III. i. 117-131)²⁶, is one bereft of indications of moral reassurance or the confirmation of an ultimate security that is, for example, available to the characters of Shakespeare's play in the person of the Duke. What *The Cenci* lacks is an unambiguously good person who can provide a sure moral orientation point. In *Measure for Measure* even though the Duke's methods are at best debatable the fact that is important about him is preserved; he is outside the limits that mark off fallible humans' insights. There is no such safety net to fall back on in *The Cenci*.

The act of Beatrice's rape is the clearest instance in the play of its glimpse into chaos. Shelley's comments on incest are revealing, in this regard:

Incest is like many other *incorrect* things a very poetical circumstance. It may be the excess of love or of hate. It may be that defiance of every thing for the sake of another which clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism, or it may be that cynical rage which confounding the good & bad in existing opinions breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in selfishness & antipathy. (To Maria Gisborne, November 16 1819)²⁷

The latter half of the third sentence of this passage is relevant to *The Cenci* and possibly has the play in mind, written as it was after the completion of the tragedy. (Shelley was copying *The Cenci* for the press on August 11 1819, according to Reiman and Powers. ²⁸) However, Shelley's distinctly two-sided view of incest strikes one as a little too precise to be tenable. It may simply be the case that, as occurs with his presentation of incest in *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), Shelley's preoccupation with modes of extremity borders on caricature. The incestuous relationship of Laon and Cythna, though symptomatic of positive familial harmony, asks us to suspend disbelief too greatly:

And such is Nature's law divine, that those
Who grow together cannot choose but love,
If faith or custom do not interpose,
Or common slavery mar what else might move
All gentlest thoughts ...

(2686-2690)

In *The Cenci* Beatrice and Cenci 'grow together' but there is no love between them because of Cenci's 'slavery' - his subjugation of Beatrice. The above lines seem to endorse Mary Shelley on Shelley's view of evil: 'The prominent feature of Shelley's theory of the destiny of the human species was that evil is not inherent in the system of the creation, but an accident that might be expelled ... Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there would be no evil, and that there would be none.' ²⁹ But in *The Cenci* evil is inherent: it is in fact the normal mode compared with which goodness seems an aberration. Giacomo's following lines provide an example that illustrates that whenever people in the play look for moral guidance they find only moral discord:

I am as one lost in a midnight wood,
Who dares not ask some *harmless* passenger
The path across the wilderness, lest he,
As my thoughts are, should be - a murderer.

(II. ii. 93-96, my italics)

Giacomo is addressing Orsino; there is an accompanying suggestion that Giacomo wants Orsino to show him the way but, ironically, 'harmless' is what Orsino is not. Giacomo is lost within his own mental murkiness - the danger is both external and internal, an objective enactment of a subjective state of mind. The first line is borrowed from the opening of Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off from the straight path.

(I, 1-3) ³⁰

Dante the pilgrim then tells how he encounters Virgil, who guides him down into the underworld. Virgil is an assured figure of morality. He provides affirmation in the midst of confusion. No such moral assurances are available to Giacomo. His statement of fear confirms that the play is stripped of the order that the hero of *The Divine Comedy* has access to. The moral universe of Dante's poem is carefully structured and ordered. By contrast, the moral universe of *The Cenci* is structured only in so much as it is consistently either confused or susceptible to chaos.

The characterisation of Beatrice is the area that offers the severest problems of indeterminacy in the play. It is also the area of the play in which we are most likely to find the play's essential meaning or meanings. Part of the difficulty that the reader is faced with stems from the fluidity of Beatrice's characterisation. She is the central character of the play and, Macbeth-like, changes from an initial state of stoicism tempered with humanity to a limbo of madness, and then finally, at the very end, to a kind of pragmatism that is partly divorced from those initial qualities of humanity. It is hard to evaluate Beatrice because at each turn of the play we must evaluate a new dimension to her character. She in turn is stripped of the means by which she could properly assess herself and her actions. As Stuart Sperry puts it: 'at the last she is unwilling or unable to see that she has been perverted'.³¹ Beatrice's ignorance about herself precipitates her actions which, in turn, complicate the reader's view of her. After she is raped she becomes a far more shadowy figure in the sense that her concerns and emotions revolve exclusively around one end - the murder of her father. The celebrated chasm speech illustrates the way in which this exclusivity prevails:

there is a mighty rock,
 Which has, from unimaginable years,
 Sustained itself with terror and with toil
 Over a gulph, and with the agony
 With which it clings seems slowly coming down;
 Even as a wretched soul hour after hour,
 Clings to the mass of life; yet clinging, leans;
 And leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss
 In which it fears to fall: beneath this crag
 Huge as despair, as if in weariness,

The melancholy mountain yawns ... below,
 You hear but see not an impetuous torrent
 Raging among the caverns, and a bridge
 Crosses the chasm; and high above there grow,
 With intersecting trunks, from crag to crag,
 Cedars, and yews, and pines; whose tangled hair
 Is matted in one solid roof of shade
 By the dark ivy's twine. At noon day here
 'Tis twilight, and at sunset blackest night.

(III. i. 247-265)

The passage as a whole strikes one, on one level, as a declaration of the need for an unflinching resolution. What impresses is the language's functional directness, its raw concision and the way in which it creates its effects with a combination of empirical detachment and cool foreboding. The passage is also strongly suggestive in its psychological incisiveness. As Michael O'Neill comments: 'The subjective dimension - the relevance of the passage to the spiritual states of both Cenci and Beatrice - is strong enough to prevent us from reading the lines as a piece of "isolated description" [this phrase refers to the Preface]'.³² Beatrice's psyche is at the core of the passage - the rape and the shockwaves that it has caused filter into the imagery. The words 'tangled hair' (262) recall the 'wandering strings' of hair (III. i. 7) that are undone and are a symbolic projection of the loss of Beatrice's virginity, and indeed self-possession. As in *Alastor* (1816) the poetry creates its effects by marrying natural landscapes with mental states. But there is also a mood of intensely felt barrenness and primitive violence. The speech can be interpreted as a controlled eruption from the unconscious. Its phraseology is alive to the way passion lies buried in the depths of the mind, like the 'mighty rock'. The word 'unimaginable' also points to the difficulty of visualizing these passions, fraught as they are with a sense of

danger and vastness. The powerful alliterative pull of 'terror and with toil' alerts the reader to the manner in which Shelley is making Beatrice self-conscious about language, allowing her to be aware of its potential for unleashing an implicit but disquieting power. It is as if the rape has tapped a part of her mind previously locked away and dormant, and which has now been given an opportunity to reemerge in all the starkness of an imaginative outburst. The lines 'Even as a wretched soul hour after hour, / Clings to the mass of life ' (252-253) recall the phrasing of one of Beatrice's earlier speeches:

'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another ...

(III. i. 18-20)

The drawn out feel of the first line of the first extract (252) suggests the accumulative pull of the first line of the second extract (18) and the words 'pluck' and 'glues' create a mood encapsulated in the phrase 'Clings to the mass of life' - namely one of claustrophobic entrapment and sexual repugnance.

The speech closes by reprising the feel of lines 16 to 22 from Act III, scene i. Here we see again, in a different manifestation, the legacy of this mood of claustrophobic violation: 'and high above there grow, / With intersecting trunks, from crag to crag, / Cedars, and yews, and pines; whose tangled hair / Is matted in one solid roof of shade / By the dark ivy's twine.'(260-264) The language stresses an ever-present self-reflexiveness in its repetitions and alliterations: 'from crag to crag'; 'solid roof of shade'. These phrases all point to a sense of the ubiquitous and unavoidable. A 'solid' roof of 'shade' in particular, by making concrete something intangible, suggests a certain muscularity, barriers of unalterability, as if Beatrice's mind is no longer flexible. The reemergence of the rape in so many various incarnations in the speech testifies to Shelley's mastery



of language here. The fact of this variousness indicates that the memory of the rape remains engulfing and disorientating. The reader is presented with an array of imagery that leaves us groping for a reference point. There is at once too much and too little to grasp onto.

The transformation in Beatrice's character is apparent in the gradual change in the way in which she speaks. After Act III her speeches become increasingly like the Count's, touched by megalomania and an unreal apprehension of her own status. As Stuart Sperry puts it: 'in the end [Beatrice] ... becomes her father's child in a way she was not at the outset of the play.'³³ The resemblances in her speeches are the outward signs of this. For example, after Savella's arrival she says: 'Both Earth and Heaven, consenting arbiters, / Acquit our deed.' (IV. iv. 24-25) This sounds like Cenci's:

Aye, as the word of God; whom here I call
To witness that I speak the sober truth; -
And whose most favouring Providence was shewn
Even in the manner of their deaths.

(I. iii. 55-58)

But with this echo comes the suggestion that the fact that God should sanction something in this play is not necessarily good. There is a strong hint here that Beatrice too has replaced integrity with expediency and gone back on her very first remark: 'Pervert not truth' (I. ii. 1). Beatrice's immovability is stressed in a way that also reminds one of Cenci's unflinching, sub-human will:

The deed is done,
And what may follow now regards not me.
I am as universal as the light;
Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm

As the world's centre. Consequence, to me,
Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock
But shakes it not. (IV. iv. 46-52)

The Shakespearean resemblances (lines 48 to 51 are a reworking of Macbeth's: 'I had else been perfect, / Whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad and general as the casing air' (III. iv. 20-22)³⁴), seem to have been inserted here to help us see that, beneath the apparent affirmation, there is a grave distortion involved in Beatrice's self-mythologising picture of herself. Like Macbeth she has lost sight of herself.

The most telling sign of the way in which Beatrice's character has transmuted into a resemblance of Cenci's is the fact that as Beatrice approaches Marzio in Act V, scene ii, he covers his face, just as Beatrice covered hers when Cenci approached her in Act II, scene i. She has in fact become the visible incarnation of her father. Shelley, by making these resemblances to Cenci, is undermining our desire to side with Beatrice. These echoic nuances are subtle but hard to ignore. They point to the way in which evil reflects itself in the play - whether it is in the way that religion is synonymous with injustice or in the way in which characters' corruptions filter into each other. There is no escape from evil and Beatrice's decline into it reinforces this feeling. I share Wasserman's view that this is part of the didactic intention that Shelley saw as being at the root of drama. He sees her moral ambivalence as being designed to '[engender] ... our internal debate ... and cause us to know ourselves.'³⁵ As Shelley puts it in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821): 'In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect.'³⁶ This passage, however, rather uneasily weighs notions of 'censure or hatred' with notions of 'self-knowledge and self-respect'. The two seem to have been juxtaposed as if they were exact opposites and mutually exclusive. In addition, the first part of Shelley's relates to the *internal* issues of the drama, whereas the second concerns

what that drama might bring forth, *externally*, in the sense of a lesson having been learnt or absorbed from the enactment of the play. The slipperiness of the passage testifies to a mode of indeterminacy that leaves a residue of the unfathomable in the reader's mind.

The speech that closes Act IV is one of the most subtle in the play. In it are variously combined motifs from Beatrice's period of initial righteousness, though now twisted into something that resembles Shelley's description of Michelangelo's Christ in *The Last Judgement*: 'Under the holy Ghost stands Jesus Christ in an attitude of haranguing the assembly. This figure which his subject or rather the view which it became him to take of it, ought to have modelled of a calm severe awe-inspiring majesty, terrible yet lovely, is in the attitude of common place resentment.'³⁷ The phrase 'terrible yet lovely' recalls Shelley's description of Beatrice in the Preface: 'Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom *energy and gentleness* dwell together without destroying one another'. (My italics)³⁸ Beatrice has lost that quality here; she gives an impression of caricature and token sentiment:

She knows not yet the uses of the world.

She fears that power is as a beast which grasps

And loosens not: a snake whose look transmutes

All things to guilt which is its nutriment.

She cannot know how well the supine slaves

Of blind authority read the truth of things

When written on a brow of guilelessness:

She sees not yet triumphant Innocence

Stand at the judgement-seat of mortal man,

A judge and an accuser of the wrong

Which drags it there. (IV. iv. 177-187)

The speech builds to a partial climax, partial because it is opposed by the tone Beatrice employs, one that holds nobility and a parody of nobility in suspension. The speech is full of images of both token malevolence ('beast', 'snake', 'supine slaves') and token virtue ('brow of guilelessness', 'triumphant Innocence'). Beatrice's apprehension of virtue has become too simplistic and reduces it to the level of a commodity, quantifiable and unreal. We cannot quite believe in her exalted claim for 'triumphant Innocence' which is dragged to 'the judgement-seat of mortal man', undercut as this sentence is by the rhetorical posturing Beatrice cultivates, which in turn suggests her own moral myopia. She cannot conceal her own telling self-righteousness which pierces the veil of the irony that she also draws across her import here. Beatrice's innocence has been inflated, by her continual denial of guilt, into a caricature.

By the end of the play she does manage to regain a large measure of self-knowledge and assume a more benign quality once more. In one of her last speeches she dimly realises that she has become the visible incarnation of her father:

Even though dead,
Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
Scorn, pain, despair? (V. iv. 69-72)

His spirit has lived on in *her* and she has unwittingly worked for *him*. This fact is at first shrouded in the cocoon of Beatrice's self-deception and so, at first, it is difficult to perceive the true import of these lines. The way the realisation emerges - that she has become her father - accounts for the true significance of these lines. Beatrice's view of her actions is one that fails to take into account her own guilt. It is left up to the reader to fill in the gaps in Beatrice's apprehension of herself. It is only when we do this that the play finally rises to the heights of

its own dramatic methods. Though we have all along identified with Beatrice, though of all the characters she has been the only one we could empathize with, in many ways she was the *one* person that we needed to be most objective about. By the end of the play the vistas of such objectivity begin to come into sight as Beatrice perceives the nature of the moral universe of the play, and with her perception comes Shelley's insistent reminder that the reader, not Shelley himself, must supply his own moral frameworks within which to place Beatrice's perceptions.

In her final speech Beatrice reclaims a dignity and stoical resignation that we have not witnessed since Act I. The quiet ordering of life implicit in the binding of the hair is a final gesture toward the life that is about to be denied. It also suggests, as Stuart Peterfreund has pointed out, that 'Beatrice ... [symbolically reclaims] her purity, if not the literal physical fact of her virginity'.³⁹ This last speech finally puts the 'monster of thought' to rest as Beatrice's mental state subsides into a gentle suspension - gentle enough to be communicated *through* language and not in spite of it. This final act of resignation does allow us to discern that a type of integrity has reemerged here, though earlier quashed within the play's environment of overbearing corruption. If Shelley had not allowed it to have been quashed then *The Cenci* would be an altogether less ambivalent work, and not one that continually presses on the reader the need for a definitive interpretation of Beatrice's status - and of the play's meaning, so closely tied up are the two - while consistently refusing to provide an assured basis for arriving at such an interpretation. In *The Cenci* Shelley's achievement has been to confront the reader with moral ambiguities that we know we must somehow resolve while showing the way in which these ambiguities are beyond resolution. The play leaves us in the dark and, as at the end of *Julian and Maddalo*, we feel chastened yet expectant. The next poem I examine, *Adonais*, also looks into arenas of moral uncertainty but offers a glimpse of a domain in which such

uncertainty might be overcome by something higher and therefore less questionable.

*Adonais***Liberation and Destruction**

Adonais's (1821) treatment of death makes the poem peculiarly provisional in terms of its emotional and intellectual outlook. The subject of death is initially one that fosters a mood of consolatory lamentation. It ends by precipitating and pressing forward a view of imaginative and spiritual liberation. The latter view is intimately connected with the glimpse the poem offers at the end of a higher vision that apparently signals a harmonious union with Adonais while also suggesting a demonic force that, in itself, is at odds with harmony. Such duality, both in the fact of the changing perceptions of death that the poem offers, and in the simultaneously harmonious and demonic vision of life beyond the grave, accounts for the poem's difficulty. The poem, like all pastoral elegies, begins by grieving for the loss of a life but ends, unlike other elegies, by grieving for life itself and insisting on the need to get beyond its distorting veil ('Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity' (462-3)). It, like *The Triumph of Life*, conveys a sense of life as the progenitor of a process of victimization and disfiguration. The poem is indeterminate because it vividly recreates this sense of life as a *cul de sac* that stifles, as opposed to enlarges, imaginative and spiritual possibilities, while suggesting a solution - an entry into a higher realm - that may be merely an act of pragmatic escapism. *Adonais* strains to reach toward a solution to the problem of loss and bereavement. Such straining lifts the poem into realms of the imagination, while also confronting both Shelley and the reader with a sceptical and comfortless view of the problem of death.

As Christine Gallant puts it, 'The literary convention [of the pastoral elegy] that is intended to help the poet transcend mortal grief is at odds with Shelley's

realisation of it in this poem.' ¹ Shelley takes the convention in hand at the start of the poem but, by its end, his incorporation into it of both personal and metaphysical elements practically transforms the genre of the pastoral elegy into something that is unrecognisable. The work closest to Shelley's in this respect is Milton's *Lycidas* (1638) which similarly unites the universal and personal, consolatory and elatory. However, Milton's espousal of Christian theology is absent in *Adonais*. Shelley replaces it with an agnostic belief in immortality that is wilfully called into being and may be both a pragmatic means of escaping life's horrors and a gateway to a realm of enlarged sensibilities. Whereas Milton's poem has about it the simplicity of faith, Shelley's is characterised by the rhetoric of intellectual stoicism.

Richard Holmes thinks that the strain created by this reinterpretation of genre is too great: 'The attempt to combine overwhelming personal feelings with the high, marmoreal style of a public monument did not succeed.' ² Holmes's view is an understandable one to take and raises the question whether *Adonais* is a poem whose formal success may be dubious but whose emotional content is compelling enough to overcome such dubiousness. To some extent the poem's power lies in the fact that, especially in the latter section of the poem (stanzas 39 onwards), it struggles to contain the vehemence of Shelley's sentiments. The Spenserian stanza's courtly origins are overshadowed by the greater tug of an emotional compulsion. By the end the poem drives towards an emotional honesty that will not allow itself to be reined in and reaches its furthest pitch of intensity while suggesting the precariousness with which such honesty prevails. In the last third of the poem Shelley's handling of the Spenserian stanza allows for a greater transparency to emerge: the formal elements of mourning are left behind. By 'transparency' I mean here a more compelling emotional energy.

Keats's death was the immediate trigger to the writing of the poem. The enduring legacy of Keats's poetry is acknowledged by the various allusions to it which serve the function of suggesting Keats's literary presence and this, in turn,

parallels the gradual articulation of the fact of his presence in nature later on in the poem. The volume of 1820 entitled *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other poems* has a prominent place in Shelley's mind. The poems in this volume were the ones most admired by Shelley.

In Ross Woodman's words, *Adonais* 'concerns the plight of the visionary in a society controlled by tyrannical forces'.³ Shelley felt himself to be such a figure and consequently the writing of the poem provided an opportunity to mourn his own, as well as Keats's fate.

The personal edge to the work is foreshadowed in early drafts of the Preface, later cancelled by Shelley on the advice of John Taaffe.⁴ Here Shelley self-deceptively tries to make nonchalant his own disappointment with the way in which he has been received by the literary establishment: 'I will allow myself a first and last word on the subject of calumny as it relates to me.'⁵ Shelley also paints a picture of a fatalistic reclusiveness that has been forced upon him: 'As a man, I shrink from notice and regard; the ebb and flow of the world vexes me; I desire to be left in peace.'⁶ A passage such as this might have been the precursor of the passage in the actual Preface that alludes *Ode to a Nightingale* (1820): 'It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.'⁷ This kind of detached abandon is also reflected in several of Shelley's letters from the period of composition (which was, according to Reiman and Powers, between April and July 1821.⁸) Implicit in the following extract is the sense of death as release: 'it would be one subject less for regret, to me, if I could consider my death as no irremediable misfortune to you'. (To Claire Clairmont, ? 14 May 1821)⁹ The last two extracts point to *Adonais*'s obsession with death as a means with which to escape 'the ebb and flow of the world' (from the cancelled Preface¹⁰), or, in the poem's terms, 'the contagion of the world's slow stain'. (356) This concentration on death leads, in Richard Holmes's view, to a problem: 'The poem seeks to celebrate the indestructible life of the creative spirit, in art and in nature; yet its personal drive and its most intense images tend towards

consummation and death.' ¹¹ This, however, is an oversimplified view in that it fails to take into account the poem's altering conceptions of death. It is, after all, the transformation of the perception of death from an initial image of destructiveness to one of liberation undercut by a different kind of destructiveness - that of wilful abandon to the elements - which gives the poem its power.

Another difficulty with the poem is whether it proceeds in a linear fashion. Is Shelley's awareness of his ending apparent at the start of the poem, and if it is, does that not make the sense of the poem as a voyage of discovery, in some way, redundant? Ronald Tetreault's comments are illuminating, in this regard: 'Regarding the poem as a linear progression clearly privileges the climax over the opening situation, but viewing the poem as a whole on subsequent readings reveals the artfulness of such a strategy.' ¹² It is important to bear in mind that Shelley's poem can only give the illusion of happening in time. By virtue of the fact that it is so carefully wrought and orchestrated it immediately suggests a pain staking artifice and completedness that has no equivalent in real time and, by implication, real life. The poem exists as a whole and should be read as such, with an awareness of its ongoing and fluid structure. This position has been carefully and comprehensively articulated by Earl Wasserman. ¹³ His main argument is that *Adonais* proceeds by virtue of the fact that each of its movements provide a successive redefinition of the central concerns and themes of what has gone before so that the poem only comes into its own right by its end, at which time it has been fitted into a wider thematic and imaginative context. This argument illustrates how the poem must be read both with an awareness of its *whole* structure - so much of a piece is the poem - but also with a sense of its ongoing fluidity. Like *Adonais* himself who is continually being redefined and transmuted into other incarnations, the poem is also moulding itself into successive realisations of its own meaning. The movement by which these various modes are effected is very carefully wrought. *Adonais* adheres to the

formal precision of the pastoral elegy and wants to impose strict order on the chaos of grief. However, the poem's emotion is eventually of a kind that is more heartfelt and acute than formal and reserved and this signals a radical departure from, say, the strictly impersonal elegies of Bion and Moschus. The final third of the poem is a display of rhetorical rapture that suggests that the poet has glimpsed into a world whose engulfingness goes hand in hand with such rapture.

Shelley not only had *Lycidas* in mind but also Bion's and Moschus's elegies, though their augustness is remoulded into a tone that mingles the delicate poise of mourning with the exultant ring of declamation. Such malleability of tone allows for the argument that death is preferable to life to be held in suspension, as it is in this passage from Shelley's *Essay on the Punishment of Death* (1820): 'whether death is good or evil, a punishment or a reward, or whether it be wholly indifferent, no man can take upon himself to assert.'¹⁴ *Adonais* takes the sense of uncertainty pinpointed here and channels it into a poetically fruitful direction. What impresses about the poem is not only its assertions of belief and knowledge but also its intimations of what is only half glimpsed and understood.

ii

The opening of the poem wavers between consolation and despair, between a ruthless assertion of reality and an attempt to come to terms with it. The first lines - practically a direct echo of Shelley's own translation of Bion's *Lament for Adonis* - convey both grief and an inability to shape the contours of that grief:

I weep for Adonais - he is dead!

O, weep for Adonais! though our tears

Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head! (1-3)

The mute tone is in sharp contrast to the highly emotive Preface. The first two lines, in particular, with their emphasis on repetition, suggest an attempt to be eloquent that has been broken. The plain fact of the limits of human endeavour is announced immediately - the tears do not 'thaw the frost', although we might expect them to, in spite of the fact that tears, insubstantial and slight, would be ineffectual alongside the robust and static 'frost.' The admission of human failing makes the lament the more powerful.

Angela Leighton sees the lines as representative of one of the difficulties of the poem and of the genre as a whole - whether or not the careful artificiality of the pastoral elegy can really do justice to a quality of grief that must necessarily contradict artifice since such grief would stand on the threshold of silence, rather than provide an occasion for rhetorical eloquence: 'These formulaic first lines of the poem express a "leisure for fiction" [part of a phrase that Dr. Johnson used to describe Milton's *Lycidas*,¹⁵] which is in antithesis to their claim to represent weeping.'¹⁶ Leighton claims that 'Shelley's elegy admits the fact that to write is to forgo the real nature of grief, and that the language the poem employs is, because of an awareness of the loss that the act of writing denotes - a loss that stems from the absence of the subject that it is describing - one that is 'aware of its own deceptions and ornamentations.'¹⁷ Leighton's observations about the function of language in the poem place it within a framework that points to the extent of Shelley's artistic self-consciousness. Though the poem is, on one level, a rhetorical and elaborate work that is distanced from the complexity of the reality that lies beyond the scope of such rhetoric, the poem is, on another level, a vivid apprehension of a core of ambiguity that cannot lie comfortably within the apparatus of its own rhetoric. Is Adonais (Keats), in entering the higher realm that the poem describes, merely abandoning himself to the elements of nature in a pragmatic act of escapism, or is such an act a consciously meditated means of enlarging his own spirituality? This ambiguity transmits itself as much through

the self-awareness that Leighton describes as through the poem's reluctance to comment on the meaning of such self-awareness.

The first three stanzas of the poem are very elaborately punctuated. The verse is not allowed to flow, instead it starts and stops tortuously, each line slowly arriving at a new realisation of the extent of suffering and each stanza falling into place as a self-contained unit of meaning. The first stanza begins with a realisation that is exclamatory; the second moves to a mode of questioning and the third returns to exclamatory realisation and includes an imperative which signals something like real urgency ('Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!' (20)). The final three lines of the stanza are weighted by the presence of parallel phrases:

- oh, dream not that the amorous Deep

Will yet restore him to the vital air;

Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.

(25-27)

'Amorous Deep' is juxtaposed with the 'vital air' and the Miltonic echo (compare 'remorseless deep' from *Lycidas* (50) ¹⁸ tells the reader to read the passage with both an historical awareness, as if the 'Deep' has always engulfed its victims from Milton's time down to Shelley's, and also with an awareness of how Milton's carefully resonant phraseology informs the language of *Adonais*. The last line rounds off the stanza in a stoical manner. In the last third of the poem this deliberative style will be replaced by a more improvisational fluidity. The style of the first two thirds of *Adonais* suggests the weightedness of life, the way it drags people down, while the style of the last third suggests the levity of death and the freedom that it offers - a view that is, so to speak, retrospective and only makes sense when the transformation in the views taken of life and death is completely effected by line 465.

These opening stanzas remain detached in terms of their emotional content - the depiction of death as 'Kingly Death' and 'White Death' (55 and 66) lends the verse an air of allegorical abstraction. Shelley here is somewhat subservient to the genre's trappings and conventions. Certain metaphors do assume a life of their own, however, by presenting the reader with a residue of the impalpable: 'as with no stain / She faded, like a cloud which had outwept its rain.' (89-90) The cloud that outweeps its rain is an image that reverses expectations in the reader's mind in that it makes explicit what is normally only implicit: that a cloud holds water. Shelley is very particular about the way in which he wants nature to mourn. In a similar instance of the use of simile, meaning here is muffled rather than furthered:

And, as a dying meteor stains a wreath
Of moonlight vapour, which the cold night clips,
It flushed through his pale limbs, and past to its eclipse.

(106-108)

The lines are characterised by the kind of self-awareness that Leighton talks about; they also impel the reader to collaborate with the poet and ask us to be aware of the fact of the poem's imaginative realm, a realm that houses fictions that have been carefully cultivated. The words 'stain', 'wreath', and 'vapour' all work to give the poetry an air of exactitude that is paradoxically countered by the nonchalant manner in which the lines flow. Such exactness is disarming in that it offers the reader an image to connect with which only manages to let meaning regress into intangibility. The vapour is 'clipped' - both embraced and cut off - which suggests the manner in which Keats's life has been cut off by being embraced. This in turn points to the poem's more fundamental ambiguity; namely, did Keats have to die in order to experience this embrace? In a similar manner, Keats can only become merged within the 'One Life' by being absent

from an earthly existence. This paradox parallels the sense of Shelley's words, in the poem, as being acutely aware of their representational status; the language insists on its own surrogate-like quality and is at best only a substitute for the experience that it attempts to convey. Metaphors like the one developed in lines 106 to 108, by calling attention to a mode of imaginative intricacy, reflect the poem's awareness of its own devices and configurations. Such self-consciousness becomes a comment by the poem on its own inadequacy.

iii

In Keats's 'To Autumn' (1820) nature is painted in terms that seem to denote a harmonious fertility - perhaps the very essence of the natural harmony that has been disrupted by the poet's death in *Adonais*:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core ...

(1-6) ¹⁹

Shelley's allusion to the poem, in lines 116-117 (as pointed out by Reiman and Powers ²⁰), signals the elegist's awareness of Keats's poetic legacy. In the lines quoted above the personification of nature (the sun is referred to as 'him') points to a diversity of natural fruitfulness: it is as if the season of Autumn and the sun are related to each other as human beings are related as friends. In the opening lines Keats explores the potential for natural celebration and a fertility that

resides in ease and peacefulness. The natural world of *Adonais*, on the other hand, only has the capacity to represent this kind of affirmation at certain favourable moments (for example in stanza 19). The entry of Adonais into nature suggests another poem by Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, in which a desire for an imperceptible but alluring oblivion is drawn:

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth,
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim...

(15-20)²¹

The last line is seductively insistent with its gentle alliteration and the positioning of 'dim' at the end. The personal, intimate style of these lines, addressed as they are to the nightingale, suggests the very provisionality of desire and wish fulfilment. In *Adonais* nature's presence comes across more assertively:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone ...

(370-374)

The lines impress upon the reader the broad-rangingness of Adonais's presence but a note of contrivance also creeps into the poetry. The sense of 'listing' in the last two lines is too methodical to be simply joyous. This gives the poetry a feel

that is at odds with, say, the opening of 'To Autumn'. The absence of the tone of euphoria we might have expected makes us question the conviction of these lines. Shelley does not allow us to identify the mood of the passage as unhesitatingly as we might want to. Shelley tries for a pantheism, but it comes across more as shadow than substance. The complexity of tone, holding the apparent and the real in suspension, prepares the reader for the intricacies of the end of the poem, when Adonais will finally outsoar the nature he is here only superficially incorporated within.

To some extent, then, the allusions like the ones to Keats's poetry tell us how *not* to read *Adonais*. The numerous Miltonic echoes suggest that Shelley wishes to acknowledge the past while redefining it. Stanza 14 is full of images that could have derived from *Lycidas*:

Morning sought

Her eastern watchtower, and her hair unbound,
Wet with the tears which should adorn the ground,
Dimmed the aerial eyes that kindle day ...

(120-123)

The way in which the poet draws nature here and endows it with intimate human traits suggests that nature is more immediately part of the human condition. In Milton's poem, however, nature is not realised in the same way, instead it is more patently symbolic of either celebration or mourning. (See, for example, the lines 'He must not float upon his watery bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind' (12-13) and 'So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed ... and with new spangled ore, / Flames in the forehead of the morning sky'. (168, 170-171²²))

In Shelley's 'A Summer Evening Churchyard' (1815) a similar debt to a past writer is evident - in this case, Thomas Gray, and his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) - but the debt is more palpable and so gives the reader an

orientation point that is reassuring. In 'A Summer Evening' the manifestations of nature have about them a certain familiarity after the elaborate emblems of *Adonais*. Because nature is realised in such an emblematic manner in the latter we cannot help but perceive it as remote. In 'A Summer Evening Churchyard', on the other hand, what the poet describes comes across as more distinct because it is stripped of this emblematic function:

The wind has swept from the wide atmosphere
Each vapour that obscured the sunset's ray;
And pallid Evening twines its beaming hair
In dusker braids around the languid eyes of Day...

(1-4)

The last two lines, that deal, like Stanza 14 of *Adonais*, with the hair of something that is not concrete, are nevertheless more straightforward than the corresponding lines in *Adonais* because they give an impression of familiarity brought about by the fact that the process that is being described has been *observed* and not imagined, as it is in *Adonais*. Observation implies the something that is real and can yield reference points, while the imagination, though it throws up vivid sensations and situations, remains more elusive and intangible. Shelley's elegy gives us access to an intricately realised imaginative world that is nonetheless beyond the vistas of familiar experience.

iv

Certain passages in *Adonais* play on the discrepancy between the fact that to grieve is to be uncertain and the fact that the act of writing a poem is, in some way, to declare certainty. The poem's self-consciousness takes in the fact of the

clash between the artifice of poetic finality - the certainty of a poetic utterance - and the artlessness of a kind of finality that cannot be limited to words alone and must lead to silence. The following passage is an example of Shelley's attempt to lay bare the inner meaning of such silence by tricking the reader into misreading the poetry:

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,
But for our grief, as if it had not been,
And grief itself be mortal! (181-183)

This announcement of the inadequacy of modes of mourning signals the way in which the poem has begun to stray beyond the confines of its allegorical frame so that it has a perspective on itself that is almost as objective as the perspective that the reader might have on it. By the time we come to this passage the levels on which the poem exists have multiplied. In one sense it is a poem that devotes itself to the task of mourning the death of a great writer, in another it is a poem that views its own attempt to mourn from without. The fact that the poem can be self-conscious in this manner is tantamount to a denial of mourning. It is left up to the reader to fathom Shelley's own critique and its meaning; suffice it to say that his self-awareness creates the ground for the poem's efficacy but also qualifies its declarations of faith.

In the last line that is quoted above (183) Shelley cleverly allows his argument to fall back on itself. He picks holes in the edifice that he is trying to construct so that this passage, while taking a step forward, also takes a step back. The way in which the phrase 'And grief itself be mortal!' arrives at the end of the sentence gives it the ring of illumination, although the line is actually more an admission of defeat. 'Grief' is as susceptible to the fragility of mortality as that which it is mourning. The next lines (184-5) carry intimations of a type of emotion hitherto stifled within the rigidity of the formalized lament. The echoes from Shelley's

own essay 'On Life' (1819) ²³ signal a greater agnosticism. These lines are subtly being transformed into something like cries from the heart: 'Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene / The actors or spectators?' (184-185). Such emotion carefully prepares the reader for the final part of the poem. For example, the three stanzas that Donald Reiman separates out (stanzas 27-29) in the poem ²⁴ are poised on the edge of an apprehension of reality that is no longer exclusively one of the imagination. Though the lines in stanza 29 that pinpoint the three types of poet - as Reiman puts it, 'the "godlike mind", the imitative popular poet, and the poet of independent genius who mourns his own fate in that of Adonais' ²⁵ - are didactic, this didacticism is cloaked by a language of raw intensity. The poetry is full of grandiloquent phrases such as 'unpastured dragon' (238), 'obscene ravens' (245), 'whose wings rain contagion' (248) and 'each ephemeral insect' (254). 'Unpastured dragon' refers to the critic who was responsible for Keats's death, as Reiman and Powers point out. ²⁶ 'Unpastured' suggests savage and opposed to natural harmony. Similarly, 'obscene ravens' indicates a primeval barbarousness. Such phrases reflect how the poem has come a long way from the artifice and poise of its opening. The Miltonic pulse, however, is still present and so too is the style of Shelley's own translations from Goethe's *Faust* (1808). Timothy Webb has helpfully pointed out the influence of *Faust* on *Adonais*: 'If *Faust* suggests the difficulty of balancing the claims of the two worlds, of spiritual and social experience, of life before and after death, so too does *Adonais*.' ²⁷ In *Adonais* there is the same awareness of a world that lies beyond human reach. The lines at the start of Stanza 29 step outside subjective viewpoints and home into objectively perceived realities:

"The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;
He sets, and each ephemeral insect then
Is gathered into death without a dawn,
And the immortal stars awake again;

So is it in the world of living men:
A godlike mind soars forth, in its delight
Making earth bare and veiling heaven" ...

(253-259)

The lines might easily harmonise with this passage from Shelley's translation of the 'prologue in Heaven' from *Faust* in that they have a similar sense of detached observation about them that homes in on the cosmic with great ease:

The sun makes music as of old
Amid the rival spheres of Heaven,
On its predestined circle rolled
With thunder speed: the Angels even
Draw strength from gazing on its glance,
Though none its meaning fathom may: -
The world's unwithered countenance
Is bright as at Creation's day.

(1-8)

The lines from *Faust* also suggest Stanza 19 of *Adonais* - a stanza that pulsates with a sense of gathering activity, and an accumulative pull towards realising the 'animation of delight' (*Prometheus Unbound* IV. 322):

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst
As it has ever done, with change and motion,
From the great morning of the world when first
God dawned on chaos ...

(163-167)

The first line offers a panoramic view, a broad sweep of vision, as the verse presses forward, each line ending with a weighted word: 'Ocean', 'burst', 'motion', 'first'. This comprehensive animation recalls the cosmic imagery that Faust uses here:

A melancholy light, like the red dawn,
Shoots from the lowest gorge of the abyss
Of mountains, lightning hitherward: there rise
Pillars of smoke, here clouds float gently by ...

(98-101)

There is an impression of breadth and immediacy, as if we ourselves are in the midst of what is being described.

The immediacy of stanzas 28 and 29 of *Adonais* is replaced, in stanzas 31 to 34, with a more intricately hesitant style. This passage - the famous self-portrait - brings the personal element of the poem to the forefront but it should be noted that the portrait, so often seen as merely self-serving and self-pitying, is in fact a structural device that has been placed where it is for a reason: namely, to facilitate the movement from impersonal mourning to a personal vision of the 'One Life'. The self-portrait's quality of personalness is, however, disguised by its mythological character. The Actaeon myth draws a parallel that invites the reader to read the stanzas with an awareness of literary artifice:

he, as I guess,
Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,
Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness ...

(274-277)

In the phrase 'as I guess' Shelley's casualness brings about a marked sense of distancing from himself, as if he could be talking about somebody else. In a later line - 'Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey' (279) - the poetry is given a narrative feel that is strictly opposed to the confessional, private tone of lyric poetry. Thus the passage is, on one level, an elaborate instance of fictionalising and, on another, allows such fictionalising to reflect an inner core of emotion that is strictly private. The portrait also serves the important function of making the connection between Shelley and Keats and stresses points of similarity in the line that describes the flowers: 'His head was bound with pansies overblown'. (289) It is almost as if Shelley is now the corpse himself - the wreath of line 94 comes to mind.

The portrait also reminds one, in its intrusion of personal, though allegorized emotion, of the kind of reality that a pastoral elegy chooses to displace in its insistence on formal elegance. It is no accident that the polemical attack on the critics follows this passage. Just as the attack reflects human outrage, the portrait reflects human frailty. If the emotion expressed is also a little grotesque it is fitting that it should be: the injection of human ignominy makes sure that the formalized lament does not stray too far from the reality of human suffering.

Leighton sees the portrait as a metaphor for the vulnerability of poetic inspiration:

Shelley is describing [in lines 280-286] the very condition of poetry, which is the failing image of inspiration. These lines contain a clear echo of that aesthetic of lost signatures and failing light or fire which is elaborated in the 'Defence'. Poetry is a mere trace of the divine passing, and its language is inspiration on the wane.²⁸

Such a view gives the *Defence of Poetry* (1821) a prominent place in the reading of the poem. The *Defence* (composed just before *Adonais*) stresses the fragility

of inspiration, the difficulty of capturing it: ' when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet' ²⁹ , as well as suggesting the spasmodic nature of creativity: 'the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness'. ³⁰ But even as Shelley is aware of the constraints with which the poet has to contend, he repeatedly emphasizes the poet's privileged position in terms that inevitably recall Keats's entry into the 'One Life': 'A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.' ³¹ This sentence from the *Defence* is composed, however, of a series of assertions that rely more on a tone of exultation to propel them than on a grasp of something intrinsically demonstrable. *Adonais*, on the other hand, has about it something of the carefully reasoned argument that substitutes faith with logic. It suggests the rigour with which Shelley has created a system of belief that is remarkable as much for its definition of areas of ignorance and uncertainty as of knowledge.

v

Part of the sense of the eventual ascent into cosmic spirituality with which the poem ends is transmitted early on in these lines:

Come away!

Haste, while the vault of blue Italian day

Is yet his fitting charnel-roof! (58-60)

Leighton sees the lines as confirmation that nature and Keats have become indivisible, as Keats's voice now 'sounds audibly in the voice of creation.'³² The lines stress the ubiquity of Keats's presence, the way in which he is discernible in both the lowest and highest things, the sublime and the earthy. The lines seem to sing out with an assurance but their assertiveness borders on the contrived. This is intentional. Shelley's tone is too multi-layered to ring completely true. The way in which Keats's presence seems here to be quantifiable - listed in the specifics of 'from herb and stone' - contradicts the spontaneity these lines want his spirit to represent. What Shelley imagines here is an external realisation of creativity, the kind of creativity that is outlined in this passage from a letter to Thomas Love Peacock:

I now understand why the Greeks were such great Poets, & above all I can account, it seems to me, for the harmony the unity the perfection the uniform excellence of all their works of art. They lived in a perpetual commerce with external nature and nourished themselves upon the spirit of its forms. Their theatres were all open to the mountains & the sky. (23-24 January 1819)³³

Here this vision's realisation is straightforward; in *Adonais*, the vision is more complex, conveyed in a manner that does not allow the lines to be as rapturous as they might appear.

It is the same kind of vision that characterises Shelley's description of the 'island paradise' of *Epipsychidion* (1821). In their boat, Shelley and Emily will be simultaneously oblivious to the external world and also be controlled, almost at a subliminal level, by it. The natural surroundings will have a fundamental link with the human impulse to live. Similarly, in *Adonais*, the natural surroundings, at this stage in the poem, begin to reflect their potential for affirming life, rather than, as at first, mourning death:

... while the one Spirit's plastic stress
Sweeps through the dull dense world ...
... bursting in its beauty and its might
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

(381-382, 386-387)

The lines strain outwards, now rarely end-stopped, suggesting an ascent into a higher realm, creating the impression of an accumulative progression. As Peter Sacks puts it, 'in the last section of the poem ... the stanzas yield their potential for exploratory romance, for the progressive crossing of thresholds. There the alexandrines do not seal a falling cadence; rather they mount beyond themselves.'³⁴

This quality is discernible in these lines as well:

And where its wrecks like shattered mountains rise,
And flowering weeds, and fragrant corses dress
The bones of Desolation's nakedness
Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead
Thy footsteps to a slope of green access
Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead,
A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread.

(435-441)

The stanza is full of quasi-oxymoronic phrases ('flowering weeds', 'fragrant corses') that suggest the amalgamation of death and life. It is as if the elaborate description of 'Desolation' - the relation of its 'bones' that are 'dressed' - makes it the less engulfing; it yields hallmarks of the physical, clearly defined, and therefore stripped of the vagueness that might suggest something more malevolent.

The last four stanzas of the poem rise to a pitch of rhetorical singlemindedness that is both beautiful and terrible. Stanza 52 opens with a moment of transition:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. (460-464)

We are poised here on the brink of silence, satiation that is something like an absolute knowledge. For once the poetry's resolve to utter assertions is not undermined by the kind of contrivance that was noticed in my discussion of stanza 42. These lines (460-461) oscillate, pendulum-like, in lucid clarity. There is a quality of final and definitive knowledge - Heaven emits light, while the earth engenders shadows. The final lines (462-464) gently but firmly pinpoint the deceptiveness of life - a serpentine beauty that hides an inner impurity that Shelley, in his eagerness, is willing to abandon in his quest for the uncorrupted and the pristine. The last line uses vehemence to channel its energy towards the realisation of something that is positive, but in doing so, is unable to conceal a lingering note of the compulsive. '*Death* permits the individual to reunite with the One', as Reiman and Powers's gloss puts it ³⁵, but only by propagating the process that it seeks to bring an end to - that of fragmentation and dissolution.

The objectivity and ruthlessness of the next stanza inevitably temper the tone of triumphant resolution that is trying to emerge. The unveiling of inner emptiness is delivered with clinical detachment, as if Shelley is scornful of his own poetry's tendency to embellish. The pastoral elegy's formality has been submerged by an insistence on sharply polarised observations that displace allegory and replace it with an emotional intensity that is uncompromising:

A light is past from the revolving year,
And man, and woman; and what still is dear
Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.

(472-474)

The next line ('The soft sky smiles, - the low wind whispers near') - isolated and tender - seems to announce a respite from the rigour of what has gone before. It is in fact only another kind of rigour in itself: one that further propels the poem to its end, and the recognition of the silence that is the 'relinquish[ing of] composition'.³⁶

Stanza 54 utilises its benevolence for destructive ends. It is a stanza of liberation that turns into destruction. In the opening lines there is a quality of liturgical simplicity (reinforced by the echo from Dante in line 478). But as we reach line 482 the word 'blindly' suggests a note of equivocation: 'blindly' implies without design, without thought. This anticipates the abdication of thought that characterises the desire that all have for the 'fire' of line 485. Finally, line 486 refuses to be anything other than absolute in its espousal of extinction. We no longer know if what the poet talks of is a new birth or just another death - another in that it follows Adonais's. Stanza 55 distances itself from this mechanistic reductiveness and its self-reference in line 487 ('The breath whose might I have invoked in song') suggests a last awareness of that which is still earthbound. Shelley is borne 'darkly, fearfully, afar'. It is a frenetic yet solemn exorcism, accompanied by a mercurial presence - the star-like soul of Adonais who has now entered nature completely. His presence is both one that the poet can take reassurance in and one that unnerves. The lines create an impression of penetration: 'Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven' (493). Adonais *burns*, he does not shine or twinkle and such energy seems too great for the fragility that is suggested by 'veil'. This very indigestibility and tumultousness alert the reader to the fact that the poem's refusal to abandon the Dionysian in its

enactment of Adonais's reincarnation will ensure that it cannot have easy recourse to the benignity of mere faith.

Shelley's abdication of himself is both destructive and liberating but above all it is an irretrievable abdication and signals a knowledge that makes an earthly existence no longer possible. It has an edge to it that is too hard-driven to allow us to say that *Adonais* is a poem that ends by affirming. The poem's journey towards the 'One Spirit' has intimations of joy but the point that it makes about the *need* - exhaustively drawn and, in itself, exhausting - to arrive there goes a large way towards undermining such joy. The ending is not a rejection of uncertainty; instead it suggests a voyage into an intuitive but unknown terrain. Shelley's abdication of himself carries with it a duality: it is both an act of desperate escapism and a surrender of himself to spirituality. We can not resolve these opposites and this accounts for the work's indeterminacy. The next poems that I look at - the late lyrics to Jane Williams - also thrive on the sense of uncertainty and self-consciousness that I have argued is an important factor in the efficacy of *Adonais*.

The Late Lyrics to Jane Williams

Recreating the Moment

Like *Adonais* (1821), the late lyrics to Jane Williams (1822) are poems characterised by their author's self-awareness, in this case an awareness that reshapes the boundaries of the enclosed world of the lyric poem. Shelley brings his own identity to the forefront of the poems. In doing so, he stresses his own isolation from others and offers a ruthless impersonalization of himself. The lyrics seek to recreate Shelley's mental fluctuations; they proceed by virtue of their readiness to trace lines of thought and patterns of reflectiveness. By doing so they lay bare the impossibility of realising in language the finality of deeds. William Keach, in regard to Rousseau's utterance about 'words' and 'deeds' (280-281) in *The Triumph of Life* (1822), makes a point that is relevant to a discussion of the late lyrics: 'Words can be "seeds of misery" both because they are sown by and because they sow suffering.'¹ The knowledge that words can work in this way is what gives the late lyrics both a quality of release and uncertainty. Tonally the poems are amongst the most subtle Shelley wrote in that they are very often propelled by forces that threaten to fragment them and they contain, even as they try to stave off, forces of change that rob the poet of his momentary happiness. They are indeterminate because they suspend Jane between the poles of an imaginative emblem of redemptive potentiality and the intangible complexity of a person. Opposition lies at the heart of the works and takes the form of the desire for happiness and the knowledge of forces that threaten to dissolve it, a longing for longevity and an insistence on transience.

The lyrics were composed during a particularly comfortless period of Shelley's life. In the poems, Jane becomes a potential means with which to escape the concerns and troubles Shelley was saddled with. His marriage to Mary was more

strained than ever and his faith in poetry itself seemed exhausted: 'I wish I had something better to do than furnish this jingling food for the hunger of oblivion called verse: but I have not'. (To Thomas Love Peacock, January 11 1822).² Shelley's state of mind at the time of the poems' composition - between January and June 1822 - has at its core an apprehension of human beings that is at best reductive and at worst misanthropic: 'My firm persuasion is that the mass of mankind as things are arranged at present, are cruel deceitful & selfish, & always on the watch to surprise those few who are not-'. (To Leigh Hunt, January 25 1822)³ In addition to the strain of his marriage there was also the debilitating influence of Byron's presence. As William Keach puts it: '[Shelley's] ... openness to Byron's ruthless efficacy was bound to erode what confidence he had in, what ambitions he had for his own major projects.'⁴ Comments such as Shelley's remark that verse is the 'jingling food for the hunger of oblivion' may have been self-deprecatory ways of accommodating Byron. It was customary for Shelley to adopt a private posture of self-effacement in his letters to Byron, a condition brought about by the knowledge that he had failed to achieve anything like Byron's success and fame as a poet. Some of the lyrics suggest Byron's urbanity but are unable to diffuse an underlying anxiety as Byron might have done. While Byron, in his own lyric poetry can be distanced from his subjects (for example in 'She Walks in Beauty' (1815)), Shelley's late lyrics thrive on their closeness to the event or person at the core of the work. Byron's more personal lyrics, in particular the lines 'On This Day I Complete My 36th Year' (1824), which I examine later, also shed light on what distinguishes Shelley's poems from Byron's. Shelley recreates emotion in all its untidiness and contradictoriness and with an assurance that takes on board the vehemence of despair. The following extract from a letter to John Gisborne captures a mood of acute uncertainty that, in the late lyrics, is given a creatively fruitful outlet:

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. (June 18, 1822).⁵

The phrase - 'the passing moment' - appears earlier in the same letter: 'Jane brings her guitar, and 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 moment 'Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful.'" ⁶ The quotation from *Faust* (1808) reflects the concern for happiness 'After long pain' ('To Jane. The Invitation', 45) that is at the core of the poems. But Shelley's use of the quotation is inevitably ominous in that this is the phrase that, once used, will seal Faust's doom in Goethe's play. In *Faust* the phrase is an explicit statement that denotes a mood of dissolution. In Shelley's late lyrics this mood is only implicitly articulated; the desire for the moment to remain is certainly there but it is not voiced so overtly because there is at the same time an undercurrent that signals the impossibility of the moment's staying. Timothy Webb sees Goethe's play as having entered Shelley's psyche at this time in a way that was more than merely incidental: 'the experiences of Shelley's last months were meshed in his own mind with the experiences of Faust and [the quotations from *Faust* indicate] that he sometimes measured his own life in terms of Goethe's words.'⁷ If Shelley identified himself with a mythological creation in his own life, it becomes easy to appreciate the ease with which he furthered mythological devices in poems like 'The Magnetic Lady To Her Patient' and 'The Serpent is Shut Out From Paradise'. These poems erect a veil between their immediate subject and the reader's response to it in order to distance the emotion at the heart of the poems. For example, the first verse of 'The Serpent is Shut Out From Paradise' progresses by virtue of its insistence on symbolic

paralleling that is at first obscure but becomes clearer when this paralleling finds its terminus in the identity of the poet himself. Ultimately, however, this assumption of poetic disguise becomes just another means of accommodating and furthering intensely personal ways of presenting feeling. The contrast between the formality of role playing and the fluidity of emotion signals the poetry's attempt to order and retain experiences that lie beyond the domain of language. Shelley is trying to preserve momentary happiness but his attempt to do so must ultimately be subjugated to the realisation that forces that impede this attempt are greater than the forces that might guarantee its success. Byron's legacy, Mary's coldness, and the persistence of change hover beneath the apparent affirmations. As Judith Chernaik puts it the poems 'celebrate present happiness in the certainty of loss ... [they] do not seek beyond the "present and tangible object" but rather draw a magic circle around that which is mortal and doomed.'⁸ The knowledge implicit in the following extract from a letter of April 1818 - some four years before the composition of the late lyrics - is the same knowledge that the poet of the late lyrics is privy to and its significance strips the poet of the assurance of knowing that he is in control of his destiny:

The curse of this life is that whatever is once known can never be unknown. You inhabit a spot which before you inhabit is as indifferent to you as any other spot upon the earth, & when, persuaded by some necessity you think to leave it, you leave it not, - it clings to you & with memories of things which in your experience of them gave no promise, revenges your desertion. (To Thomas Love Peacock)⁹

The passage is informed by an awareness of the limitations imposed on Shelley by his exile in Italy and this mood of displacement can be said to be a general characteristic of the late lyrics. The lyrics simultaneously illustrate the poet's

desire for acceptance and love while articulating a sense of the apartness that frustrates such desire.

ii

In the late lyrics to Jane Williams Shelley is cut off from the natural world that he describes. Like the Poet of *Alastor*, the defining hallmark of his relationship with nature is a perception of it that is heightened only because he observes from an extraneous position. In many ways the poems represent the antithesis of the Wordsworthian vision of a reciprocity between man and nature as visualized in a poem such as 'Tintern Abbey' (1798). Shelley is closer to the mood of Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode* (1802) and its meditation on estrangement from true communion. Wordsworth's poem, on the other hand, thrives on a sense of the nourishment that the poet finds in nature. 'Tintern Abbey' seems to illustrate the argument of the following passage from a letter to Thomas Love Peacock dated 23-24 January 1819:

I now understand why the Greeks were such great Poets, & above all I can account, it seems to me, for the harmony the unity the perfection the uniform excellence of all their works of art. They lived in a perpetual commerce with external nature and nourished themselves upon the spirit of its forms.¹⁰

Poetic excellence is attributable to the harmonious interplay between nature and man, the former's fecundity feeding the latter's inspiration. In 'Tintern Abbey' nature summons sensations that transcend the barriers between the physical and the spiritual:

oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns, and cities, I have owed to them
[The 'beauteous forms' (22) of nature]
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind ...

(25-29) ¹¹

The lines give thanks; they concede the power of memory and its ability to recreate the absent. There is, in these transparent yet lofty phrases, an awareness of the benignity of nature and its capacity to exude affirmation and create security. 'I have owed to them, / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart' are lines with a rhythm too expressive to be bowed by formality, yet too weighted to seem merely incidental. The repetition of 'felt' suggests a liturgy that is taken up in the pellucid quality of 'And passing even into my purer mind', a line of gentle inevitability. Shelley's late lyrics adopt a similar narrative method. But while Wordsworth recreates a mood, Shelley attempts to recreate a moment. However, the late lyrics lack Wordsworth's ease. Shelley's recreation is all too aware of its surrogate quality; where Wordsworth is calm, Shelley is self-conscious, attempting to document reality with something like compulsion: 'Rise, Memory, and write its praise!' ('To Jane. The Recollection', 4). A poem like 'Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici' lacks the meditative self-assurance of 'Tintern Abbey'. The themes are similar: loss, memory and time. But in Shelley's poem the attempt to capture a moment eventually has to give way to the actual change that mars the attempt to do so. Shelley records reality as it unfolds; his scrupulousness must necessarily mean a subservience to the forces of change; Wordsworth steps back from reality and resolves unrest with meditation. For Wordsworth memory becomes a means with

which to ward off loss; for Shelley memory's very existence means acknowledging the finality of loss.

In an earlier lyric, 'Stanzas Written in Dejection' (1818) which, as Judith Chernaik comments, is comparable to 'Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici'¹², there is a process of ongoing definition and redefinition in the poem that progressively alters the parameters of the poet's suffering. There is, in the poem, a sharp contrast between the glory of the day and the poet's melancholy. Shelley's detachment from himself anticipates 'The Serpent is Shut Out From Paradise', as well as 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient'. In these lines the description of the process of dying both disturbs and moves:

And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

(34-36)

The deliberate, accurate description of the process of ongoing deterioration suggests that the poet still has all his sensibilities about him but these record only dissolution as opposed to affirmation. The poem is insistent in its reductiveness:

Others I see whom these surround,
Smiling they live and call life pleasure ...

(25-26)

The simple device of juxtaposing 'life' and 'pleasure' automatically makes both alien and impersonal, as if they were quantities or objects. The poet throughout registers an experience as if it were not of direct concern to him and yet it affects only him. This aloofness is carried a step further in the last lines of the poem as Shelley brings his own text into focus, in a similar way to the ending of the 'Ode

to the West Wind' (1821): 'And, by the incantation of this verse' (65). In both passages the poems suddenly take on a new level of self-consciousness that is disorientating for the reader. In the 'Stanzas' Shelley's self-awareness is so uncompromised that, for a moment, the lyrical mode becomes a self-critique:

Some might lament that I were cold,
As I, when this sweet day is gone,
Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,
Insults with this untimely moan -

(37-40)

We are disorientated because the illusion of reality that the poem seeks to create is snapped in the phrase 'this untimely moan', and so the reader is stripped not only of this but also of belief in the poem itself - neither stands up under the severity of Shelley's refusal to let fiction persist. Similarly, the late lyrics to Jane Williams are works that diligently trace patterns of mental activity and thought processes while insisting on the way in which poetry is at best reductive in its figurations if only because it is called into being after the event it seeks to depict and therefore becomes, in some vital way, superfluous to it. But this illustration of the inadequacy of poetry makes us appreciate more vividly the experiences that are in the process of being depicted. As William Keach puts it: '[Shelley's] ... writing is often most compelling when it questions, explicitly and implicitly, its own empirical origins and linguistic resources.'¹³

iii

'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient' is a poem set, until the last stanza, within an imaginative realm that places Jane on a mythological level. It thrives on a sense

of the unknowable - Jane proffers a kind of redemption, but she is made unavailable to the 'patient' of the poem even as the poem acknowledges that the latter's 'being' is 'to its deep / Possess' (35-36) by Jane's being. The 'magnetic' of the title refers to the qualities of animal magnetism Jane has: the ability to put a person into a deep and therapeutic sleep. It should be pointed out, however, as Paul Dawson puts it, that 'when Shelley treats the subject [of animal magnetism] in his poetry, he does so not in a spirit of scientific explanation, but with a delicate scepticism about its claims to literal truth which frees its poetic potential.' ¹⁴ The poem begins in mid-flow: "'Sleep, sleep on, forget thy pain -'" (1). It is as if sleep and pain are part of the normal condition of the patient, the one feeding the need for the other. The next lines pinpoint a sense of physical and spiritual security. But with the word 'pity' (4) we see for the first time a note of emotion that is not otherworldly creep in. Nonetheless the tone remains detached, in that coming where it does, in a line of clauses, "'My pity on thy heart, poor friend'" is a line that echoes the ready-made concision of the earlier lines and this concision signals a quality of neutrality: the speaker is not as involved in the patient's plight as it might at first appear. She remains beyond human concerns. The curiously muted lines that follow suggest both salvation and the persistence of anxiety:

"And from my fingers flow
The powers of life, and like a sign
Seal thee from thine hour of woe" ... (5-7)

'Thine hour of woe' is a phrase that illustrates the recurrence, the repetition of 'woe', something expected and inevitable. The personalization of the woe as 'thine hour' makes it the more inescapable so that the phrase takes on the connotation of a harbinger of death. The next line further points to the lady's

detachment: "'And brood on thee, but may not blend / With thine" ' (8-9). 'Brood' suggests an underlying sombreness, so much so that the 'blend' that follows it seems animated in comparison. Yet both words are more intimately connected in their monosyllabic understatement. 'Blend' is hesitant, not a display of passion but a reining in of it. The lines register the gulf between desire and the realisation of it, and their power lies in the fact of this.

Lines 5 to 7 of the poem seem to have been influenced by the 'curse' in *Manfred* (1817). This occurs in Act I, scene i. As a whole the passage has a simplicity and sensuality that is altogether more direct than the corresponding part of Shelley's poem. The lines flow freely, following each other as small units of sense, consistent and complementary:

When the moon is on the wave,
And the glow-worm in the grass,
And the meteor on the grave,
And the wisp on the morass ... (192-195) ¹⁵

The Magnetic Lady has a similarly mystical presence as transmitted in these lines. But Byron's passage is designed to engender a mood of hypnotic evocativeness, delivered as it is after Manfred falls. Thus it serves a dramatic function and the lines lack the implied portentousness of Shelley's poem. In these lines the verse is lucid and incisive:

In the shadow of the hill,
Shall my soul be upon thine,
With a power and with a sign.

Though thy slumber may be deep,
Yet thy spirit shall not sleep ... (199-203) ¹⁶

The speech is formal, each stanza an elegant restatement of a revelatory truth. Byron's words are effective because they do not question. Shelley's lines are effective because they eschew this unequivocalty.

In the second stanza of 'The Magnetic Lady' we move one step nearer to the emotional core of the poem. The fact that Jane can only really empathize with her patient by visualizing the latter's predicament as her own signals the way in which her relationship with him is kept at arm's length. The opening line of the stanza mingles a motif of continuity (the repeated "Sleep, sleep on") with a disruption of continuity ("I love thee not"). The second part of the line arrives in the manner of something expected and seems immediately linked to what has gone before, yet this very readiness alerts the reader to the actual disorientation of experience that the words denote. "I love thee not" is both absolute and nonchalant in its context, as if merely an extension of the lulling rhythm of the refrain "Sleep, sleep on".

The third stanza further develops this method of incompatibility of form and meaning:

"Sleep, sleep, and with the slumber of
The dead and the unborn ...
Forget thy life and love;
Forget that thou must wake, - forever
Forget the world's dull scorn. -
Forget lost health, and the divine
Feelings which died in youth's brief morn;
And forget me, for I can never
Be thine. - " (19-27)

The seductive feel of the first line is apparently taken up in the rhythm of the second, but in fact seduction is arrested by the grimness of the import of the second line's meaning. This listing and accumulative gathering of strands of obliviousness amounts to a denial of joy, despite our urge to read the stanza as overtly therapeutic. The last four lines, in their detachment, give neither more nor less to the quality of experience; they deny the potential any experience might have to outlive its immediate context:

"Forget lost health, and the divine
Feelings which died in youth's brief morn;
And forget me, for I can never
Be thine. - "

The lines imply that to forget is easy and can be accommodated within the framework of ordinary living. Yet the lines ask for a denial not only of the past - "youth's brief morn" but also the present - "forget me, for I can never / Be thine. - " The steadfast resolution of this command points to the intractability of life and the poet's inability to shape his destiny. As a whole the discrepancy between the negative meaning in this passage and the positive incantatory ease of delivery lets the lines hover between different emotional modes. The lines mingle a sense of intangible well-being and a growing mood of nihilism. This very contradictoriness allows one to glimpse the unresolvability of Shelley's situation if only because that situation is as much about emotional fluctuation and change as about the need for emotional equilibrium.

By contrast, stanza Four is all sensuality and animation that seems to reprise the possibility of 'a second youth' (34). However, this eclipse-like moment is immediately challenged by the announcement that follows: "By mine thy being is to its deep / Possess." (35-36) Coming where it does, the line is like an affirmation not of a happy state of fertility but of intractability. 'Possess' has a

connotation of ownership that is predatory and irretrievable, as if the patient of the poem is in thrall to the Magnetic Lady and under her subjugation.

The last stanza emerges from its imaginative shell. The dialogue is suddenly incidental, almost bland. The question "'What would do / You good when suffering and awake'" (39-40) is superfluous in the light of the abstractions that have gone before and the new exactness denies the suggestiveness of the earlier stanzas. This is deliberate and the reinterpretation of Jane's status as healer in the last stanza points to the provisionality of her status in general. She has been an emblem of the poet's imagination, but in reality her status is grounded in common sense. The last stanza impresses because it allows the notion to prevail that reality could be more resistant to the possibility of redemption than the already resistant world as depicted in stanzas One to Four:

"And as I must on earth abide
Awhile yet, tempt me not to break
My chain." (43-45)

The lines simultaneously allow for the possibility of being persuaded and the sense of the poet's acceptance of a state of unchangeability. The first line is both resigned and resolute, while the last clause - "'tempt me not to break / My chain'" - is only half believed in, the choice of the word 'chain' in itself revealingly negative in its connotations of entrapment and suggesting the overriding attractiveness of breaking the chain.

'The Serpent is Shut Out From Paradise' also admits that the poet's dilemma consists in the fact that he is caught within a situation beyond his control. As in 'The Magnetic Lady', names are used in an analogous, allegorical way. The deliberative, drawn out style of the poem suggests 'When the Lamp is Shattered' (1822):

The serpent is shut out from Paradise -

The wounded deer must seek the herb no more

In which its heart's cure lies -

The widowed dove must cease to haunt a bower...

(1-4)

The first line is direct and matter-of-fact. The second line is more complex and intricate and is not end-stopped as it elaborates the initial movement of the first line. Finally the fourth line develops this elaboration even further and comes to an end two lines later. Different modulations are carried out during each line; the total effect is of a constant starting and stopping and this allows a larger sense of disaffection to pass through the verse. In 'When the Lamp is Shattered' the opening lines have a more self-enclosed epigrammatic concision:

When the lamp is shattered

The light in the dust lies dead -

When the cloud is scattered

The rainbow's glory is shed - (1-4)

What gives 'When the Lamp is Shattered' its power is the ease with which its lines unfold, leaving a residue of the unfathomable with the reader. The poem's metaphors multiply and engender further illustrations of mortality and dissolution. The persistence of the legacy of mortality is charted in language of great robustness. The poem gathers its subjects in a manner that robs them of their human status; 'When hearts have once mingled' (17) is a line that refuses to allow these hearts to exist in anything other than a collective, and so impersonal, framework. The same impersonal edge characterises 'The Serpent' and is Shelley's method of confusing and challenging the reader's grasp of identity. In the following passage the refusal to soften the unpalatability of the perceptions,

in addition to the anonymity of the phrases, lends the verse an air of indeterminate disquiet:

But not to speak of love, Pity alone
Can break a spirit already more than bent.
The miserable one
Turns the mind's poison into food:
Its medicine is tears, its evil, good. (12-15)

The echo from *Paradise Lost* (1667) in the last line (see line 110 of Book IV ¹⁷) alerts the reader to the sense in which the poem is about a state of fallenness, a distortion of grace. The poem is contaminated by its own detachment. The generalized, uncompromising phrase 'the miserable one' creates foreboding because of its very namelessness. Yet the phrase also suggests Shelley's own heart, labelled in a manner that makes misery inseparable from the definition of this heart. Unlike a comparable poem, Coleridge's *Dejection : An Ode*, the poetry's declamatory quality is not held in check by a correspondingly demonstrative lucidity. In Coleridge's poem the best lines insist upon a state of mind with epigrammatic force:

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear ...

(21-24) ¹⁸

The eloquence of the verse achieves a victory over the emotional nihilism in question. The stanza these lines are from comes to the reader in the manner of a confession, so that its last line ('I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!' (38))

becomes the stanza's *raison d'être*. The line has a quality of understatement, after the elaborations of the preceding lines that makes it the more incisive and moving, but it remains considered, not so much simulating emotion as dissecting it. Shelley, on the other hand, is not as in control as Coleridge is. The verse does not bother to explain itself in the same way. A phrase like 'the mind's poison' masquerades as objective yet originates from a subjective perspective.

In a line like 'Griefs that should sleep, and hopes that cannot die' (20) Shelley juggles with the emotional map. Here there is an inversion of the expected observation: hopes are made to seem as debilitating as grief, say. As Michael O'Neill puts it, 'the poem is at emotional cross-purposes with itself throughout'.¹⁹ In the fourth stanza we are unsure who the addressee is. Shelley moves around freely, displacing normal modes of identification:

You spoil me for the task
Of acting a forced part in life's dull scene.
Of wearing on my brow the idle mask
Of author, great or mean,
In the world's carnival. (27-31)

The ease that Shelley simulates betrays the fact of his apathy. The way in which he talks of these adopted stances ('a forced part in life's dull scene', 'the idle mask / Of author') is nonchalant but this nonchalance is born not of composure but of cynicism, the realisation of emptiness. A phrase such as 'the world's carnival' signals, in this cynical context, disaffection in a way that acknowledges that a carnival, for Shelley at least, is more of a charade than a celebration.

A poem it is worth comparing 'The Serpent' to is Byron's early lyric 'To Caroline' (1805) because the latter poem is characterised by a similar quality of emotional detachment. In the poem Byron's insistence on transience has about it little emotional compulsion. The realisation of transience has been achieved by

virtue of a kind of distancing from the self. Byron anaesthetizes emotion in a passage such as the following:

'Tis this, [the knowledge of decay and disease],
my beloved, which spreads gloom o'er my features,
Though I ne'er shall presume to arraign the decree
Which God has proclaim'd as the fate of his creatures,
In the death which one day will deprive you of me.

(13-16)²⁰

It is not that Byron does not appreciate emotion but that he appreciates it too much and, consequently, in line 16, accommodates by visualising his own death with a kind of common sense that is both disquieting and reassuring. This detachment can be attributed to the poet's self-control but in 'The Serpent' detachment conveys a sense in which the poet acknowledges, even as he tries to fight against, the fact that he is not in control of his destiny. For example, in the fifth stanza of the poem there is an underlying despair that is veiled in the delicacy of the tone and rhythm of its opening lines. The familiarity of the image of the flowers at first makes us not see the anxiousness of the search for the answer:

Full half an hour, to-day, I tried my lot
With various flowers, and everyone still said,
"She loves me, loves me not." (33-35)

'Various' is incidental, as if the poet was content with any flower, yet this openendedness is blocked in the universality of the response the flowers offer: a response that is unequivocally inconclusive. The uncertain conjectures that follow trail off into hesitancy as the stanza closes. We are aware of the poet's

strivings to find an answer and of his inability to shape the contours of the question as well as the answer. He cannot find a way of extracting meaning from his situation and that is why he remains detached from it:

And if this meant a Vision long since fled -
If it meant Fortune, Fame, or Peace of thought,
If it meant - (but I dread
To speak what you may know too well)
Still there was truth in the sad oracle. (36-40)

The refusal to disclose details in lines 38 to 39 forces the reader to make his own surmises here and this omission creates uncertainty even as it is certain in its pinpointing of the nature of Shelley's fears. Shelley's indeterminacy brings with it the realisation of the way reality is beyond his control.

In Byron's late poem 'On this Day I Complete My 36th Year' there is a more personal emotional drive in evidence that makes a comparison with the late lyrics interesting. The poem is about the persistence of desire in the face of the extinction of personal achievement and is characterised by a mood of resignation. It also suggests, in places, 'The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient' (in line 16 the phrase 'the chain' recalls line 45 of Shelley's poem) and the 'Stanzas Written in Dejection' (lines 5 to 8 recall the 'Stanzas' in that they have a similar tone and construction). The opening of the poem is touched by despair:

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet, though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love! (1-4) ²¹

The longing for stoicism in the first line is resolute. The phrase 'Tis time' is matter-of-fact and resigned, as if Byron were starting off his poem not by talking about his heart but an item on an agenda. Lines 3 to 4, however, seem to modulate into a cry from the heart that surpasses, in sheer intensity, any of Shelley's strainings after communion. The poem ultimately outsoars this mood of despair as Byron, unlike Shelley, channels it into a heroic refrain, a call to arms that leaves behind the self in a show of foolhardy nobility: ' - up to the field, and give / Away thy breath!' (35-36). (It should be pointed out that this refers to the War of Greek Independence (1824) that Byron took part in.) But while Byron dwells on himself in the poem the verse makes up in finality what it lacks in resonance. Shelley, on the other hand, though similarly disconcerted about matters of the heart seeks resolution while still considering his own circle of friends. Byron reverts to the earthiness of the battlefield:

Seek out - less often sought than found -

A soldier's grave, for thee the best;

Then look around, and choose thy ground,

And take thy rest.

(37-40) ²²

Right until the end Byron insists on a prevailing dignity inseparable from the functional, a practicality that is also spiritual.

As Charles Robinson has pointed out, 'the eight lines of Shelley's sixth stanza [of 'The Serpent is Shut Out From Paradise'] ... are directly adapted from Faust's speech to Mephisto in the "Wood and Cave" scene (ll.3345-65) [of Goethe's *Faust*].' ²³ The most relevant lines from Goethe's scene are as follows:

Who am I ? The unhoused, the fugitive,

The aimless, restless reprobate,

Plunging like some wild waterfall from cliff to cliff

Down to the abyss, in greedy furious spate!

(3348-3351) ²⁴

The above passage, though insisting on a similar sense of the outcast and the figure that is cut off from human society, as the 6th stanza of 'The Serpent', nonetheless contains a simile that gives Faust some point of contact with nature: the line 'Plunging like some wild waterfall from cliff to cliff' suggests some kind of kinship, albeit with a force discordant and uncontrolled. Shelley, on the other hand, is isolated from both man and nature. When he talks of the 'sleepless billows on the Ocean's breast' (44) that 'at length, find rest' (46) he emphasizes the natural phenomenon's susceptibility to concord after unrest. The implication is that even natural instances of unrest find a moment of subsidence and this fact confirms that what seems closest in nature to Shelley's own disaffection is in fact as removed from him as humans are because the poet does not have recourse to such subsidence.

iv

The companion poems 'To Jane. The Invitation' and 'To Jane. The Recollection' concern themselves with momentary happiness within a natural setting. 'To Jane. The Invitation' has a naturalness of tone that establishes an immediate mood of intimacy. Like the opening of *Julian and Maddalo* (1819) the poem conveys an impression of the ease of actual conversation. But within this transparency there is a tonal layering that is complex. As Judith Chernaik puts it, 'while the poet concentrates on the image of his own happiness or grief - the day, the scene - the human relationships in the background, barely hinted at, colour all he says.' ²⁵ The passages that contain merely descriptive writing - namely lines 7 to 20 and

lines 50 to 66 - flow smoothly and are unbroken, while the rest of the poem is marked by starts, stops and dashes: these passages suggest another level of meaning that contains the poet's unease.

The opening of the poem gives the impression of impetuosity:

Best and brightest, come away -
Fairer far than this fair day
Which like thee to those in sorrow
Comes to bid a sweet good-morrow
To the rough year just awake
In its cradle on the brake. - (1-6)

But even in this opening there is a small undercurrent of melancholy. The insistence transmitted in the first line points to the need to act while the time is right. The images are all poised on the edge of change in that they have emerged from other modes - for example, the 'rough year' is '*just* awake' (my italics). 'Those in sorrow' strikes an enigmatic note. The tantalizing quality of the opening admits to a kind of provisionality in nature that hints at a suppressed unhappiness.

The second stanza develops the mood of the need to get away 'from men and towns' (21) to 'the wild wood and the downs' (22). Nature is at once self-expression and order, while the towns represent discord and misunderstanding:

While the touch of Nature's art
Harmonizes heart to heart. - (27-28)

The understatement implicit in 'the touch of Nature's art' suddenly makes small the more cosmic picture that has been presented in lines 11 to 16. And yet, as

Shelley sets forth and tries to put into practice such 'harmonization' the mood of the poem almost imperceptibly alters:

"I am gone into the fields
To take what this sweet hour yields.
Reflexion, you may come tomorrow,
Sit by the fireside with Sorrow - " (31-34)

The second line, by placing the 'sweet hour' in time, implies the need to glean sweetness while it is still around, as it is not around for very long. The solitariness of just the one hour suggests that the poet is as much aware of its fragility as of its idyllic quality. In the next lines Shelley does not manage to hide his unrest behind the veil of bogus nonchalance that is drawn. The enforced domesticity of 'Sit by the fireside with Sorrow - ' strikes a false note. To 'sit by' implies companionship and communion - but why commune with sorrow? Similarly, in the later line 'Expectation too, be off!' (39) there is a clash between the flippancy of the delivery of the imperative and the seriousness of the desire. This points to the impossibility of banishing expectation and the next line, in this context, seems half-realised: 'To-day is for itself enough - ' does not ring out in affirmation but trails off uncertainly.

The last verse-paragraph recaptures the feel of the first stanza (especially lines 11 to 20). And yet the abstract quality of the last verse-paragraph makes us question its relevance. We wonder whether it should be read with other implications or whether it should be read as being purely functional. The end of the poem relies heavily on the word 'And' to maintain a sense of fluidity and fertility. The repetition of 'Awake, arise and come away' (48) becomes slightly redundant. In the first line of the poem 'come away' is merely an exhortation, but by line 48 it is an exhortation that has a faint ring of despair. Though the line can be seen as a functional refrain-like device, these other implications prevent

the reader from categorising 'To Jane. The Invitation' as a poem that is concerned merely with pleasure in its presentation of the pastoral. There is always a psychological undercurrent running beneath the immediate narrative. The intricacy of the late lyrics' re-enactment of psychological states allows the poems to explore issues encapsulated in the phrase 'the dark abyss of - how little we know.'²⁶ The ignorance this phrase denotes is utilised by Shelley to enrich the lyrics emotionally, while making them thematically hard to resolve.

The ending of 'To Jane. The Invitation' effects a seemingly benign affirmation:

Where the earth and ocean meet,
And all things seem only one
In the universal Sun. - (67-69)

It is as if the poem ends in mid-flow; the insertion of 'And all things seem only one' has a touch of artificiality about it. Beneath the affirmation there is a subtle intimation of the fact that all things are not 'only one'. The use of the word 'only' makes this vision of universality too easy, and too token, and therefore not as convincing as it would at first appear.

In the companion poem 'To Jane. The Recollection', as Peter Butter puts it, the poet feels 'that the whole scene, from the distant mountains to the flower at his feet, was bound together in a magic circle pervaded with one spirit, 'a thrilling, silent life', of which the girl was the centre.'²⁷ In the poem the belief in a picture of complete beauty is undermined by the reemergence of 'our world above' (69) which signals disaffection and the distortion of beauty. The recognition of this world's less than ideal status is present in the opening to the poem, which is characterised by a mood of compulsion:

Rise, Memory, and write its praise!
Up to thy wonted work! come, trace

The epitaph of glory fled;
For now the Earth has changed its face,
A frown is on the Heaven's brow. (4-8)

The fact that memory must be stirred into action suggests the manner in which memory is so obviously a poor substitute for the quality of the experience itself. It can not come about without the bringing to bear of an external impetus. The line 'Rise, Memory, and write its praise!' creates a sense both of urgency and deliberation. 'Write', in this context, is a word bowed down with a heaviness that goes against the natural spontaneity implicit in the 'loveliest and the last' day of line 3. 'The epitaph of glory fled' is a phrase that suggests inaccessibility, the glory has 'fled' and so, in some vital way, can never be recaptured. 'Epitaph' suggests a way of freezing that glory in the present, but such freezing in itself must be a failure to accommodate the spontaneity of this glory, attractive to the poet because of its very fragility.

The whole of the first stanza has an enchanted feel; the forest, the wind and the tempest are conquered within a domestication of nature. Even the tempest - potentially destructive and vehement - is allotted a home, which immediately disperses its capacity for creating unrest. But all along the knowledge of 'glory fled' prepares the reader for a new modulation that will ultimately take on board this fact of glory's absence. Susceptibility to emotional change is also suggested in the following lines that stress the way in which nature is potentially in a state of flux:

The whispering waves were half asleep,
The clouds were gone to play ... (13-14)

Though the waves are 'half asleep' the line is still alive with a sense of the suddenness with which change can be instigated; the clouds have 'gone to play',

but it is only a temporary departure. The lines do not guarantee permanent peace; they merely record the present absence of unrest.

The second stanza again contains intimations of discord in language that is symbolic:

We paused amid the pines that stood
The giants of the waste,
Tortured by storms to shapes as rude
As serpents interlaced ... (21-24)

The passage transmutes the calm of the preceding stanza, so that the same natural phenomena come across more portentously. The 'Tempest in its home' (12) becomes the storm that tortures the 'giants of the waste' (22) into shapes like 'serpents interlaced' (24). Notice how there is no punctuation after line 21 - this allows us either to read 'the giants of the waste' as an image that elaborates the image of the preceding pines or as something altogether different, but nameless. And the image of the 'serpents interlaced' is concisely suggestive of a claustrophobic mood of impenetrability.

The third stanza is a meditation on calmness. Its visualization of calmness as a living phenomenon makes the passage both restful and unfamiliar:

The breath of peace we drew
With its soft motion made not less
The calm that round us grew. -
There seemed from the remotest seat
Of the white mountain-waste,
To the soft flower beneath our feet
A magic circle traced,
A spirit interfused around

A thrilling silent life,
To momentary peace it bound
Our mortal nature's strife ... (38-48)

The first three lines move in and out of an inner mode of equilibrium, finally coming to rest on the clinching rhyme of 'grew.' There is something assured yet tentative in the movement of the verse; the unfamiliarity is that of novelty, and the line 'The calm that round us grew' anticipates the 'magic circle' of line 44, self-enclosed and hermetically sealed from the external world. The lines that follow the first use of the phrase 'magic circle' (44) delicately insist on a cross-fertilization of enchantment. 'A thrilling silent life' is almost a contradiction in that 'thrilling' suggests something more mercurial than silence, yet each adjective feeds off the other and points to an essential elusiveness: this silent life lies beyond the physical and reaches into the heart of things. Yet 'momentary peace' (47) confirms the unrest implicit in the opening of the poem - it arrives just at the moment of intensest joy and does so in a manner that is not dissonant but inevitable, suggesting again that joy and glory are rapturous only because they are perpetually poised on the threshold of extinction.

In the prose fragment 'On Love' (1818) Shelley articulates the notion of a paradise which 'pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap.' The passage where this comes from also suggests 'The Recollection': 'a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap.'²⁸ The prose passage visualizes a world of homogenous goodness, though it should be stressed that the passage is not without tensions: a mirror reflects this goodness, in other words that goodness is at one remove from reality. The prose passage recalls both lines 44 to 48 of the poem and the opening of stanza Four:

We paused beside the pools that lie
Under the forest bough -
Each seemed as 'twere, a little sky
Gulphed in a world below ... (53-56)

But 'The Recollection' can never endorse the certainty of the vision presented in 'On Love'. The latter posits a theory; the former presents a reality in which there is an attempt to sustain the conditions that would allow the world visualized in 'On Love' to prevail, while never managing to keep at bay forces that inevitably destroy and disrupt these conditions.

The final stanza of the poem gathers the various strands of the poem together:

Sweet views, which in our world above
Can never well be seen,
Were imaged in the water's love
Of that fair forest green;
And all was interfused beneath
With an Elysian glow,
An atmosphere without a breath,
A softer day below - (69-76)

The first two lines admit to the difficulty with which the 'sweet views' could be seen 'in our world above'. 'Can never well be seen' is both final and casual as the verse eschews the urgency of the opening of the poem. 'Were imaged in the water's love / Of that fair forest green' are lines that reverse syntactical expectations and, in doing so, create an abundance of well-being. The views are imagined not in the water but in the water's love of the forest. In other words the reflection of the water is an act of love, not merely a function of nature. The views are reflected in something that is already reflecting the 'fair forest green'.

This device recalls lines 44 to 46 and its similar mode of cross-fertilization. The lines that follow (73-76) reiterate the sense of an all-encompassing vision that is nonetheless physically imperceptible: 'An atmosphere without a breath'.

The last lines of the poem revert back to a mood of disruption:

Until an envious wind crept by,
Like an unwelcome thought
Which from the mind's too faithful eye
Blots one dear image out. -
Though thou art ever fair and kind
And forests ever green,
Less oft is peace in S[helley]'s mind
Than calm in water seen. (81-88)

The wind disrupts the water as the 'unwelcome thought' 'blots' out the 'dear image'. What the unwelcome thought is we can not tell. The suggestion is that the mind's eye is too faithful because it is too scrupulous in its registration of what is both unpalatable and attractive about reality. Though the water has been disrupted by the wind it is still the case that it is more susceptible to calm than Shelley's mind is to peace.

v

In the late lyrics to Jane Williams Shelley seems to have avoided making the mistake that he enumerates in the following extract from a letter to John Gisborne: 'I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal.' (June 18 1822)

²⁹ He visualizes Jane as someone who expresses all that is eternal - the prospect of redemption, the balm of love - while still remaining firmly mortal and elusive. But it is the way in which this duality remains inseparable that accounts for the poet's grapplings with uncertainties that threaten the possibility of happiness. This comes across particularly vividly in the last of the late lyrics that I shall be examining, the 'Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici'. Here Jane is both a product of the poet's sensibilities and an external presence, an imaginative emblem and a more realistic figure. The poem again traces the progression of the mental workings of the poet. The paradox of memory in the poem is that it only imparts pleasure when the original object of its attention, in this case, Jane, has departed:

She left me at the silent time
When the moon had ceased to climb
The azure dome of Heaven's steep,
And like an albatross asleep,
Balanced on her wings of light,
Hovered in the purple night,
Ere she sought her Ocean nest
In the chambers of the west. - (7-14)

This fine passage begins by concentrating on the fact of departure and then proceeds to develop the image of the moon in a manner that suspends both the image and the poem. The motion implicit in 'She left me at the silent time' (7) is balanced in the fluidity of the lines that follow, lines that make no attempt to develop the import of line 7 and are therefore autonomous. And yet the moon is also, in some sense, signalling extinction, the withdrawal of motion - 'When the moon had ceased to climb'. But just as the mood of stasis is beginning to make itself felt the refrain of 'She left me' reappears in line 15:

She left me, and I staid alone
Thinking over every tone,
Which though now silent to the ear
The enchanted heart could hear ...(15-18)

The first clause of 'She left me' now takes up its own development after initially being abandoned in line 8. The fact that the poet thinks 'over every tone' (those produced either by her guitar playing or her voice - we cannot say which) suggests an attempt to extract all possible meaning from the encounter that is now over. In the following lines the physical feel of the encounter is recreated in a passage which parallels memory and the sensation of Jane's 'touch':

And feeling ever - O too much -
The soft vibrations of her touch
As if her gentle hand even now
Lightly trembled on my brow;
And thus although she absent were
Memory gave me all of her
That even fancy dares to claim. - (21-27)

William Keach has described how the passage 'leaves totally ambiguous whether Jane touched him as well as her guitar'.³⁰ Keach is right to point this out but does not talk of the way in which lines 23 to 24 seem to confirm that Jane has in fact touched him, whereas they envisage only a state of potentiality. 'Even now' implies that this - Jane's touch on the poet's brow - had happened in the past because of the way the phrase is insistent about the present. Lines 25 to 27 are marked by a tone of lulling weariness as the movement of the verse becomes more hesitant and muted. Six lines later the verse picks up again but its

movement does not reflect a meaning of positive import but rather one of renewed unrest:

But soon, the guardian angel gone,
The demon reassumed his throne
In my faint heart ... I dare not speak
My thoughts; but thus disturbed and weak
I sate and watched the vessels glide
Along the ocean bright and wide,
Like spirit-winged chariots sent
O'er some serenest element
To ministrations strange and far ... (33-41)

The poet talks of the 'guardian angel', yet no attempt is made to elaborate on this, all we know about the angel is that it has gone; paradoxically, it only makes an appearance when no longer there. This refusal to elaborate points again to the late lyrics' tendency to immerse the reader in situations that are unfathomable and unresolvable. By the same token, the 'demon' that reassumes his 'throne' is another symbol kept at arm's length; what we can surmise is that the demon is so familiar an image to the poet that it does not need to be developed and that this familiarity must stem from its ubiquitousness. As if in confirmation of this reticence the next phrase seems almost a commentary on the text of the poem: 'I dare not speak / My thoughts' (35-36). The poet's isolation is complete, he merely exists 'disturbed and weak', contemplating the vessels that represent another form of constancy that is unavailable to him. The vessels glide, free, immersed in water that is 'bright and wide', 'like spirit-winged chariots'. They are both functional conveyors of people and objects and purveyors of the spirit. The last three lines of this passage are markedly different from the others as the verse eschews the direct, bare style of lines 33 to 38. Instead they are marked by a

more expansive sweep, richly phrased and resonant. Shelley finds an image he likes and then, almost recklessly, develops it with great ease and fluency while, a few lines earlier, he has insisted on a state of mind that puts a high regard on reticence. This eloquence seems to be a contradiction of the initial lack of it; in fact it merely testifies to the poem's fidelity to the fluctuations of mental patterns. The suggestion is that the mind can at one moment be inert and unreceptive, and at the next acutely aware of its surroundings and imaginatively fertile. This duality is reflected in the contrast between the stark style of the first part of this passage and the alliterative sensuousness of the second.

The passage that follows four lines later (45-50) seems imperceptibly to knit the memory of Jane's 'tones' with the feel of the natural phenomena of the wind, the flowers and the bay:

And the wind that winged their [the vessels] flight
From the land came fresh and light,
And the scent of sleeping flowers
And the coolness of the hours
Of dew, and the sweet warmth of day
Was scattered o'er the twinkling bay ... (45-50)

These lines rely on 'And' to propel them forward and are, in a sense, an anticipation of the lines that follow (51-54) in terms of tone and construction. But the later lines are very different though they share the same easeful, peaceful quality; their delivery is marked by the same effortlessness. In the above passage Shelley is preparing us for the final lines of the poem which are apparently so linked to what has gone before but in fact break with what has gone before in a profound way (see below).

In lines 45 to 50 the verse returns to the spare, direct style of lines 33 to 38 as if, once more, the poet's mind succumbs to the inactivity of mere observation.

Only one of the lines is end-stopped. The others all flow unbrokenly and rhyme either on clinching monosyllables ('flight' and 'light', 'day' and 'bay') or lulling duosyllables ('flowers' and 'hours'). The general effect is of an abundance of well-being as administered by a nature that is pellucid, benign and enchanted. 'And the sweet warmth of day / Was scattered o'er the twinkling bay' has a sense of animation that stems from the combination of 'scattered' and 'twinkling' which are words that suggest each other in their onomatopoeic expansiveness. And yet the lines are touched by redundance, as if they had crept in from another poem. Their affirmative feel makes us question their significance and durability in a poem that is so much about the attempt and need to recreate a recently deceased world within an imaginative framework rather than one that thrives on the observation of a world that is already thriving and self-sufficient. But are the lines so unconnected to the rest of the poem? Their air of irrelevance is deceptive. In fact the lines are relevant in that their appreciation of abstract pleasures inevitably recalls the more real pleasures that Jane's presence potentially embodies. This passage therefore becomes both a descriptive interlude and a symbolic bridge that links Jane with the scene that the poet is observing. As Judith Chernaik puts it: 'The enumeration of the elements of the scene - the gliding vessels, the wind, the scent of the flowers, the coolness of dew, the sweet warmth left by day - seems to parallel the enumeration earlier in the poem of the beloved's ministrations, her tones, the "soft vibrations of her touch", her healing presence.'³¹ This paralleling might signal a life of pure sensation but also allows for the suggestion that such sensuality can never be free of associative connotations. Lines 45 to 50 thus convey the prevailing awareness of Jane's enduring presence. Jane exists both as human and as spirit, finding a corresponding place in nature. She comes to represent both the signposts of eternity and mortality.

In the last lines of the poem Shelley changes key abruptly; he concentrates on a completely different image: the fisher and the fish, the hunted and the hunter.

These lines inject a note of portentousness into the poem, the more effective for following what has gone before without jarring either rhythmically or tonally:

And the fisher with his lamp
And spear, about the low rocks damp
Crept, and struck the fish who came
To worship the delusive flame:
Too happy, they whose pleasure sought
Extinguishes all sense and thought
Of the regret that pleasure []
Destroying life alone not peace. (51-58)

The first line suggests a natural addition to the scene but in fact the verse concentrates on the image of a person, not an object (the vessels) or a natural phenomenon. This in itself carries with it a suggestion of intrusion as if the 'fisher with his lamp / And spear' threatens to disrupt the delicate equilibrium in nature that the preceding lines have been observing. There is a deliberation in the fisher's movements (he 'creeps') that denotes human calculatingness. This reemergence of the human persona in such an intense and predatory manifestation, after a passage that almost leaves humans behind, confirms that Shelley's recreation of a reality has at its centre a core of acute mutability. William Keach has pointed out that the fisher can be seen as an emblem of Shelley or that 'perhaps ... [Shelley is] ... both fisher and fish - luring the reader, Jane and himself towards a grim ending.'³² But does Shelley mean to imply that, like the fish, his life can be free of obligation and the aberrations of memory? Or does he intend to endow the image with a sense of the blindness of his desire and the subjugation of reason to the will and thought to emotion? Shelley, like the fish, is doomed in the second instance merely because he exists. In any case the lines emerge as a detached dissection of the human capacity for creating

destruction. The final lines are the most reductive in the poem as the verse strains to apprehend a moral which concerns itself with how the seeking of 'pleasure' has eradicated 'sense' and the knowledge of the regret that pleasure leaves behind. The lines, trailing off into a syntactical pattern that is tortuous, coldly pinpoint the way in which pleasure cannot and does not exist in isolation. The suggestion seems to be an admonition not to seek pleasure and this rejection of what is ostensibly positive is tantamount to an acceptance of the fact that joy and pain are intertwined and inseparable. This knowledge gives the late lyrics their paradoxically driven energy. The 'Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici', taking such acquiescence further, arrives on the threshold of silence and is incomplete.

It may have been the case that 'the last poems were designed to clarify contraries which Shelley no longer hoped to resolve'³³ but it is also the case that the depiction of these contraries is in itself a resolution because it holds them in an intricate suspension. Similarly Jane's emblematic and human qualities are held in suspension as the poet realises that the salvation that the former might offer is inseparably bound up in the complex uncertainties of the latter. The possibility of salvation is entwined in the knowledge of uncertainty. It is the subtlety of the delineation of uncertainty that accounts for the poems' achievement. Uncertainty also lies at the heart of Shelley's last major work, *The Triumph of Life*, which forms the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

The Triumph of Life
The Flux of Experience

The last poem that I examine in this thesis is Shelley's most obviously inconclusive text and not merely because it is a fragment. *The Triumph of Life* (1822), Shelley's last major work, progresses by virtue of its readiness to arrive at successive redefinitions of its meaning. It concerns itself with, and has at its core, an opacity reflected in the posing of questions which are never answered in the poem. It lays bare the need to come to terms with what might be debilitating passions - passions that, if not properly tamed, might be the undoing of the protagonists of the poem. Rousseau, as a central figure of the work, represents a failure to 'temper' his emotions; his failure gives rise to experiences that ultimately distort and destroy the ideal symbols of life that he searches for. Shelley does not offer a clear-cut moral judgement on these emotions; he neither condones nor condemns them, instead he presents them from a detached standpoint. He observes rather than comments. We, as readers, take up the viewpoint of the narrator and our reactions are, so to speak, voiced through his reactions. But the indeterminacy of the poem centres on this very orientation point for, like the narrator, the reader receives no answers from the poem and the questions that are posed create areas of instability which multiply as the work proceeds.

This unresolvability is paralleled by the stylistic methods that the poem employs. The work is characterised by a readiness to fragment itself so that an initial simplicity gives way to metaphorical constructions notable for their complexity. Shelley borrows Dante's verse form, *terza rima*, and invests it with an expansiveness that is alien to Dante's economy. Stuart Sperry finds that 'Shelley's handling of the *terza rima* measure shows a mixture of strength and

delicacy, of sensuous intensity and ironic withdrawal'.¹ The verse builds its effects with detachment and vigour. Its verbal precision has also been remarked upon by Richard Holmes: '[*The Triumph of Life*] ... has a hardness of style and a lack of personal emotion which is unique among [Shelley's] ... writing: it is aloof and almost disparaging'.²

The poem has often been regarded as representing a major break with Shelley's previous works, both stylistically and philosophically, and critics have seen it as a renunciation of the poet's optimism. This is^a vexed issue, particularly as the poem is a fragment and we do not know whether Shelley intended to complete it. The poem's indeterminacy, however, is of a kind that the earlier works examined in this thesis also display; like *Alastor* (1816), *Julian and Maddalo* (1819) and *The Cenci* (1819), *The Triumph of Life* derives much of its richness and difficulty from the interaction of perspectives. Where the poem differs from its predecessors is that it develops inconclusiveness as a poetic method to greater heights of sophistication. In no other poem of Shelley's is there a more striking array of emblematic devices that the reader cannot help wanting to interpret. Yet these devices, for all the vividness with which they are developed, suggest that elucidation is impossible. After a reading of the poem the reader feels as if states of mind have been recreated with an intensity that is matched only by an accompanying sense of dissolution; for all its eloquence, the poem fragments and arrives on the threshold of silence. Like the late lyrics, it thrives by exploring a sense of the unutterable.

At the time of the poem's composition - between May and June 1822, according to Reiman and Powers³ - Shelley expresses something close to despair as to the way in which his poetry has been received. The relative failure of *Adonais* (1822) signals the pointlessness of continuing to write poetry: 'My faculties are shaken to atoms & torpid. I can write nothing, & if *Adonais* had no success & excited no interest what incentive can I have to write? -'. (January 25 1822, to Leigh Hunt)⁴ When Shelley does embark on the composition of *The Triumph of*

Life it is significant that he never mentions the poem in his letters. There is a sense in which it remains his least public work, one written without the expectation of an audience.

The Triumph of Life is saturated with literary borrowings and reworkings. It illustrates the following statement made by Shelley in a letter of 1821: 'Poets, the best of them - are a very camaeleonic race: they take the colour not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass.' (13 July 1821, to John and Maria Gisborne) ⁵ The literary context of the poem, however, is not necessarily a key to its meaning, which is ultimately not identifiable with the literary sources that have influenced it, these being primarily works by Dante, Rousseau, Wordsworth and Byron. What makes the poem unique is the way it redefines the meanings that these other works offer. *The Triumph of Life* presents the reader with a vision that it is tempting to call nihilistic, yet the poem itself refuses to define its own moral standpoint and displays instead a keen awareness of the way in which morality is not cut and dried.

As Paul de Man sees it 'The structure of the work is not one of question and answer, but of a question whose meaning, as question, is effaced from the moment it is asked.' ⁶ This effacement is the key to where the poem's indeterminacy lies; its realisation in stylistic terms conveys the impossibility of extracting elucidation from the situations that the reader and the protagonists of the poem are immersed in. The poem's symbols and questions seem to be inseparable from its meaning but the ambivalence of the symbols and the unresolved status of the questions suggest that meaning is, in the end, bound up in the realisation of the uncertainty that for Shelley constitutes experience. In the poem Shelley asks fundamental questions about the human condition: why are ideals disappointed? What is the nature of human motives and the meaning of human endeavours? Why is contemporary history a mess? The poem tenaciously tries to come up with answers and its sheer eloquence achieves a victory over the silence that must signal ignorance. But ultimately Shelley is

more impassioned, inventive and subtle while delineating these questions than while attempting to answer them.

ii

As Reiman and Powers put it, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is 'important both as an epitomizing character in the poem and as a literary influence on it'.⁷ Rousseau's fictional and autobiographical works were on Shelley's mind at the time of the poem's composition. *Julie; ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776) are important sources for the work. Edward Duffy has pointed out that Shelley revised ^{his} opinions of the Swiss writer during the years 1810-1822. During this period Shelley's comments range from the highly critical to the discerningly approving. In 1816, as Duffy points out⁸, Rousseau was a figure very much on the mind of the English Romantics. Byron, in the third Canto of *Child Harold* (1816) draws his own portrait of the writer and other Romantics such as Coleridge expressed themselves both privately and publicly about him. To begin with Shelley adhered to the standard English view of Rousseau as immoral: 'The Confessions of Rousseau ... are either a disgrace to the confessor or a string of falsehoods, probably the latter.' (14 May 1811, to Thomas Jefferson Hogg)⁹ Another early recorded comment of an unfavourable nature appears in the 'Proposals for an Association' (1812): 'Rousseau gave licence by his writings, to passions that only incapacitate and contract the human heart: - so far hath he prepared the necks of his fellow-beings for that yoke of galling and dishonourable servitude, which at this moment, it bears.'¹⁰ But by the time of the *Defence of Poetry* (1821) Rousseau occupies a privileged position alongside 'Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser, Calderon ... and the great writers of our own age [who have] ... celebrated the dominion of love, planting as it were trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and

force.'¹¹ Shelley's change of heart parallels the way Rousseau was perceived in differing ways during the period after his death in 1778. Rousseau is not a figure who can be summarised easily; his life and work were often seen as being diametrically opposed and his significance was questioned as much as it was acknowledged. Such a figure is eminently suitable for the purposes of Shelley's last major work. At the centre of *The Triumph of Life*, then, is someone who symbolises virtue and vice, fallibility and strength. As Richard Cronin puts it 'Rousseau is chosen precisely because of the ambivalence of the reactions that he provoked'.¹² He represents a fitting alternative to the classical harmony that Dante's guide Virgil, in *The Divine Comedy*, suggests. Rousseau, as the narrator's guide, takes on a greater significance than the narrator himself; Rousseau's amplification of his biography develops some of the historical Rousseau's philosophical notions. However, in a similar way to the interaction of the Poet and the Narrator of *Alastor*, the narrator and Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life* are not exclusively differentiated. The narrator provides Rousseau with the stimulus for telling his story - which actually turns out to be similar to the narrator's - and there is a suggestion that both are bound together by their mutual alienation from men and nature. Christine Gallant has gone so far as to assert that 'The choice of Rousseau ... is a devastating self-indictment [for Shelley]'¹³ but this is to see the Rousseau of the poem in too functional a light and invest him with a didactic function that ignores the way in which Shelley's Rousseau is also a poetic creation in his own right. Shelley's presentation of Rousseau amalgamates his own interpretation of the historical Rousseau with an attempt to create a poetic character who is a mouthpiece for his own ideas and concerns (some of which also overlap with the historical Rousseau's).

A key passage from Rousseau that is relevant for my reading of *The Triumph of Life* can be found in the 'Fifth Walk' of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. This late work consists of a series of ten meditations on the pleasures and drawbacks of solitude. Duffy argues that Shelley read this piece in 1815:¹⁴

Everything is in constant flux on this earth. Nothing keeps the same unchanging shape, and our affections, being attached to things outside us, necessarily change and pass away as they do. Always out ahead of us or lagging behind, they recall a past which is gone or anticipate a future which may never come into being; there is nothing solid there for the heart to attach itself to. ¹⁵

The passage anticipates *The Triumph of Life's* provisionality, as well as the way in which its key symbols - the sun, the chariot's shape, the shape all light - are constantly undergoing transformation; it also anticipates the poem's concern with the mutability of human desire and the insubstantiality of worldly aims. It suggests the poem's obsession with attempting to find the right metaphor. No other poem of Shelley's employs similes more exhaustively and this employment leads to a poetic language both oblique and concrete, vivid and detached.

The notion of insatiability in the extract from the *Reveries* appears in various guises in *Julie*. Here the emphasis is on the need to moderate emotion. In one extract from the novel Saint-Preux, Julie's lover, talks about the 'sensitive soul' who is a practitioner of sincerity and a believer in truth: 'He seeks supreme happiness without remembering that he is only mortal. His heart and his reason are incessantly at war, and his limitless desires prepare eternal privations for him.' ¹⁶ In the novel Saint-Preux eventually conquers his desires and they are subjugated to the notion of a virtuous family life, but in *The Triumph of Life* it is the failure to do this that leads Rousseau to be transformed by life into his present disfigured condition. As he himself says "I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object." (240-3) Rousseau's downfall is announced in terms that are exclusively of the self, as if he is proud to be the maker of his own undoing and this mixture of impeturbability and the admission of defeat is the key to the

presentation of Rousseau in the poem: he is both hero and victim, visionary and blunderer. It is useful to contrast this version of Rousseau with Byron's portrait of the writer in the Third Canto of *Child Harold*. Here Rousseau is more straightforwardly emblematic, less ambiguous and more safely ensconced within epigrammatic inflexibility:

Here the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,
The apostle of affliction, he who threw
Enchantment over passion, and from woe
Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew
The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew
How to make madness beautiful, and cast
O'er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue
Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past
The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast.

(725-733) ¹⁷

The verse has made up its mind about what kind of a man Rousseau was and sacrifices interpretative acumen for the sake of concise phrases like 'the apostle of affliction' and 'from woe / Wrung overwhelming eloquence'. Byron's verse is memorable because of this concision but even in the best lines such as 'yet he knew / How to make madness beautiful' there is a sense in which the poetry is drawing a veil over Rousseau's complexity in order to find an image more dexterous than penetrating. The last few lines of the stanza anticipate the style of *The Triumph of Life* as the clauses fragment: 'and cast / O'er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue / Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past / The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast.' This long clause begins with one line of thought - the casting of the 'heavenly hue' - while developing another: the comparison of the words to sunbeams. This second line of thought allows

another movement to emerge, the final phrase 'which o'er them shed tears'. The process is similar to the methods Shelley uses; for example, at lines 352 to 357 or at lines 416 to 423 of *The Triumph of Life*. In the second instance the poetry's fertility opens up areas of meaning that are explored further. The poem makes great demands on the reader and is not always easy to read because of this multifarious approach which weaves different strands together:

"And as the presence of that fairest planet
Although unseen is felt by one who hopes

"That his day's path may end as he began it
In that star's smile, whose light is like the scent
Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,

"Or the soft notes in which his dear lament
The Brescian shepherd breathes, or the caress
That turned his weary slumber to content. - "

(416-423)

The reader has to keep track of several comparisons that emerge from the initial one. Shelley's complexity of narrative line suggests how language is continually striving to recreate, in a surrogate manner, what is elusive and fleeting.

A sense of impenetrability characterises the first appearance of Rousseau and his opening remarks. It is useful to set this passage alongside Byron's portrait that was discussed above:

"Before thy memory

"I feared, loved, 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" ...

(199-204)

Here there is the first appearance, with regard to Rousseau, of the motif of tempering that runs throughout the poem: Heaven lights his spirit but the Earth, by its very impurity, corrupts it and so the spirit of Rousseau is distorted. What strikes one about the lines is their oblique presentation of this train of thought. Shelley, unlike Dante, renders unfamiliar experience in an unfamiliar way. The first two lines, apparently so simple, are deceptive. The long accumulation of verbs suggests not a man's life but items on an agenda and the final verb - 'died' - in this context comes as something of a shock. We realise that Rousseau is a spirit but the word also signals the self-contempt that marks the character of the philosopher in Shelley's poem, as if its emphatic arrival at the end of the line is a final exhausted cry from the heart. The lines that follow deploy a syntactical pattern of great intricacy as the verse eschews a linear presentation of experience in favour of a movement that oscillates like a pendulum:

"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" ...

(201-204)

Byron's Rousseau has been given the assurance of an iconic memorability; Shelley's Rousseau is assured only in as much as he has at his disposal a vivid apprehension of his past glory. The movement of these lines is oblique in its digressiveness, as if the reader is aware of the fact that Shelley might, at the last moment, confront him with a strand of meaning that confounds expectations. Their great strength lies in the way in which the essential clause that completes the meaning is left until last so that the reader, until the end, is kept guessing as to what this meaning might be. The poetry uses ambiguity in a positive way; the writing immerses the reader in a situation that simulates the ignorance that the narrator feels. The style of the poem thus gives us access to an experience that is vividly portrayed, though disorientating, and compelling in its very tenuousness.

iii

The Triumph of Life is a poem that is unsure of its own moral topography. Its insistent symbols - the sun, the shape all light - are suggestive of both good and evil, liberation and destruction. As Edward Duffy puts it, the poem is 'A post-Enlightenment *Commedia*, [and] ... is not sure of its ending because it is not sure of a *paradiso*'.¹⁸ Even the prologue, with its careful enactment of the processes of a harmonious natural world, strikes a note that is foreboding. The reader is aware that information is withheld in a line such as 'But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold' (21). We discern the narrator's alienation and the fact that he compares himself to the stars pinpoints the sense of apartness he feels. He identifies only with the impersonal cosmos. Later on the other humans in the poem are described in terms of an impersonality that makes them lose their individual characteristics and identities.

The prologue to the poem has a different feel to the rest of the work; it is the only part that Shelley revised and copied out in a fair hand. In Donald Reiman's

facsimile edition of the poem ¹⁹ an appendix traces four different openings that illustrate the degree to which Shelley strove for an effect both suggestive and descriptive, straightforward and loaded with other implications. The later elaborations on the shape all light and the chariot develop meanings provisionally touched on in the opening. Even in the very first line the affirmation that the poetry seeks to project is undercut by the sense of the burden of a 'task': 'Swift as a spirit hastening to his task' (1). The first construction of the poem is a simile - the sun is like a spirit and this brief comparison anticipates the role played by subsequent similes, though they are often more involved and obscure. But what also emerges is the possibility that the sun is not a spirit. There is an evasiveness at work in the first line that is unignorable.

T. S. Eliot has described how Dante's similes are designed 'to make us *see more definitely* the scene which Dante has put before us'. ²⁰ Dante's similes often focus on an act that is tangible and practical, for example in this passage from the *Purgatorio*:

As wax stamped by the seal
Will never lose the outline of the print,
So, your seal is imprinted on my mind.

(XXXIII, 79-81) ²¹

The simile of the sealed wax can be visualized easily and the poetry achieves its aim without great involvement. Each image is dwelled on for only two or three lines, as opposed to Shelley's images which often expend more energy on the compared act or object than on the initial source of the comparison. The effect of this is to take the reader into a labyrinth that the reader, far from finding a way out of, is trapped by.

Early on in the prologue we are aware of the way in which Shelley wants to present nature as a seamless whole, unified at levels at once ostensible and

elusive. At the start of the poem there is a continuity and consistency evident in the natural world; later this sense becomes more elusive and, with regard to the shape all light, problematic:

The smokeless altars of the mountain snows
Flamed above crimson clouds, and at the birth

Of light, the Ocean's orison arose
To which the birds tempered their matin lay.

(5-8)

The first line knits the 'smokeless altars' with the 'mountain snows' so that 'crimson clouds' arrives in the manner of an addendum to the first line. Everything follows fast on the heels of everything else; as one thing commences, somewhere else something else begins too. In line 8 there is the first use of the motif of 'tempering' that, like the word 'task' in line 1, alerts the reader to a residue of urgency and a sense of deliberation that seems to go against the grain of the otherwise unselfconscious celebration that is being enacted.

This part of the poem is carefully wrought and many of the phrases are marked by a fluid combination of exactness and unreality: 'unclose' (9), 'trembling eyelids' (10) and 'odorous sighs' (14). Such phrases demonstrate Shelley's notion that poetry 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar'.²² No other poem of Shelley's is more attuned to this idea.

The first lines of the prologue that are not just descriptive occur after the narrator has described his own situation, and, as Charles Robinson has pointed out²², are taken from Goethe's *Faust* (1808):

before me fled

The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep

Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head ...

(26-28)

This interlude allows the verse to breathe for a moment and creates a larger sense both of potentiality and expectation. The passage weaves together different strands of experience: the receding night; the awakening day; the ocean's immediacy and the infinity above. In this synthesis a sense of flux emerges as nature refuses to limit its potential for transformation and development. The natural world of *The Triumph of Life* is marked by its readiness to efface established patterns of growth and gestation.

Like Shelley's earlier work *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), *The Triumph of Life* proceeds in an episodic fashion. The opening to the poem proper is marked by an immediacy that recalls the earlier poem. In these lines from *The Mask of Anarchy* the verse realises its details in a panoramic manner:

With a pace stately and fast,
Over English land he past,
Trampling to a mire of blood
The adoring multitude ...

O'er fields and towns, from sea to sea.
Passed the Pageant swift and free,
Tearing up, and trampling down;
Til they came to London town.

(38-41, 50-53)

There is a sense of great distances being traversed. London is suddenly homed in on in the last line. The first lines also suggest the chariot that tramples on a similar multitude in *The Triumph of Life*, though in the latter one more oblivious than adoring: 'So came a chariot on the silent storm / Of its own rushing splendour'. (86-87) The panoramic quality that characterises *The Mask of Anarchy* is also discernible in the lines that describe the initial vision of *The Triumph of Life*:

Methought I sate beside a public way

Thick strewn with summer dust, and a great stream
Of people there was hurrying to and fro
Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,

All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
He made one of the multitude, yet so

Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky
One of the million leaves of summer's bier. -

(43-51)

The passage begins simply with an observation about where the narrator is, and forms one elaborately phrased sentence. The effect is one of great expansiveness as the sentence comes to rest at a point far from its original starting place. In particular, lines 44 to 46 create an impression of vastness as the vistas of the vision open up. 'All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came' are lines that are telling in their inconclusiveness. The line 'Whither he went, or whence he came' anticipates the dominant question of

the poem as phrased at lines 296 and 398. The phrasing pinpoints a condition of ignorance about the past and the present: nobody knows what has happened to him ('whence he came') or where he is going ('whither he went'). Lines like these perform the reverse function of lines 26 to 28 in that they close down the sense of potential noted earlier and replace it with an open-ended uncertainty. The final lines develop the natural simile of line 46: the crowd, like gnats or leaves, is the plaything of the elements.

Early on in the poem a characteristic that is common to the work as a whole emerges in the movement of the verse. An initial narrative line is followed through, accumulates either into a protracted simile or another image and then returns to the point at which the sentence began. Examples of this structural pattern occur at, for example, lines 62 to 73 or lines 86 to 106. In both instances the passages end on a more muted note after the verse has fragmented, separated and finally settled back into a re-emergence of the narrative line: 'but they / Pursued their serious folly as of old' (72-73) and 'but it past / With solemn speed majestically on' (105-106) respectively. In the first passage we discern a technical control that allows for an effortless change of key which brings the content back into its original frame:

And weary with vain toil and faint for thirst
Heard not the fountains whose melodious dew

Out of their mossy cells forever burst
Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told
Of grassy paths, and wood lawns interspersed

With overarching elms and caverns cold,

And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they
Pursued their serious folly as of old (66-73)

The first line suggests the vastness of the 'toil' and the excessiveness of the 'thirst' by its very refusal to give the terms anything other than a telegram-like concision. The ensuing lines come in the manner of an idyll - the fountains, dew, and breeze - that counteracts the oppression of the preceding lines. Lines 66 to 68 suggest a mood of benign fertility but such benignity seems remote, as if it appears as a fragment from another world, inaccessible and ultimately lost to the people in the narrator's vision. They do not *hear* the fountains and they do not *feel* the breeze: there is a suggestion that the faculties of the men and women no longer register the natural processes that the opening of the poem so intricately articulated. Instead they pursue 'their serious folly'. The phrase, in its quasi-oxymoronic memorability, is at once dismissive and tragic and suggests, in context, a state of irretrievable fallenness.

The second of these passages is characterised by an even greater momentum and concentration:

So came a chariot on the silent storm
Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape
So sate within as one whom years deform

Beneath a dusky hood and double cape
Crouching within the shadow of a tomb,
And o'er what seemed the head a cloud like crape

Was bent, a dun and faint ethereal gloom
Tempering the light; upon the chariot's beam
A Janus-visaged Shadow did assume

The guidance of that wonder-winged team.
The Shapes which drew it in thick lightnings

Were lost: I heard alone on the air's soft stream

The music of their ever moving wings.

All the four faces of that charioteer

Had their eyes banded ... 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. -

So ill was the car guided, but it past

With solemn speed majestically on ...

(86-106)

Here some of the key themes of the poem are combined: the tempering motif that occurs in line 93; the intangibility of the 'Shape' and the persistence of forces of mutability that cloud a true evaluation of the meaning of the vision. We, like the observer, are presented with a situation that is arresting in its symbolic suggestiveness but opaque in its literal import. 'So sate within as one whom years deform' (88), for example, is disorientating because of its eschewal of identity and yet compelling for the same reason. 'As one whom years deform' is marked by an impersonal strain, as if years are as distinct as a scar or a bruise. The 'dun and faint ethereal gloom' that tempers the light suggests an underlying corruption that the light is consumed by. Similarly the 'shapes' that draw the Shadow of line 94 'in thick lightnings' are 'lost', dissolved in the climate of intangibility. The shapes are lost at almost the same moment of their perception. The next lines - 97 to 101 - combine straightforward observation ('I heard alone on the air's soft stream / The music of their ever moving wings') with

epigrammatic unflinchingness ('little profit brings / Speed in the van and blindness in the rear'). The passage closes in a mood of resignation that again furthers the narrative line (as at line 73) while creating foreboding in its very understatedness: 'So ill was the car guided, but it past / With solemn speed majestically on' (105-106). 'Majestically' is a word that creates a complex effect in that, by pinpointing the empty splendour of the chariot, it bestows a kind of dignity that is almost inappropriate. This incongruousness is characteristic of the way the poem constantly deceives the reader's expectations.

Charles Robinson has pointed out the references in *The Triumph of Life* to Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante* (1819)²⁴ which is written in the voice of Dante and is also in *terza rima*. In the latter work Byron is at once more colloquial and more rigid than Shelley and lacks an expressiveness that is fundamental to *The Triumph of Life's* idiom. In this passage the verse is final in a way even the most straightforward lines in Shelley's poem are not:

Must all the finer thoughts, the thrilling sense,
The electric blood with which [poets'] arteries run
Their body's self turned soul with the intense
Feeling of that which is, and fancy of
That which should be, to such a recompense
Conduct? shall their bright plumage on the rough
Storm be still scatter'd?

(III, 161-167)²⁵

The description of the poet's make-up in lines 161 to 162 is singularly concrete in its realisation of what might be otherwise elusive, and the bold questions are alive with a sense of rhetorical posturing. However, this finished quality makes the poem less fluid. Byron's work does not simulate the actual feel of sensations of wonder and horror that the narrator of *The Triumph of Life* does. Michael O'Neill

describes lines 176 to 205 of the poem as having 'rhythms [and syntactical patterns that] keep pace with the Poet's dawning horror'.²⁶ The starts and stops in the verse shape and reflect the manner in which the initial vision of the poem unveils itself suddenly and in unexpected ways. Shelley's writing in this passage is at its most malleable as the verse moulds itself with assured elasticity:

Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
Half to myself I said, "And what is this?
Whose shape is that within the car? & why" -

I would have added - "is all here amiss?"

But a voice answered .."Life'...I turned and knew
(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

That what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hill side
Was indeed one of that deluded crew,

And that the grass which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes. - (176-188)

Earlier in the poem (in lines 155 to 164) the men and women are described in terms of natural phenomena like lightning and waves on an ocean. This paralleling is now taken a step further as a man - Rousseau - becomes synonymous with nature. As Harold Bloom puts it 'A man has become an old root; rather than a natural object having been humanized, a human being has been

naturalized.'²⁷ The natural world of the opening, seemingly so harmonious and enchanted, has taken on a different air in its readiness to draw humans into its environs in a very literal sense.

In the above passage we are struck by the control of the writing. Though the rhythm is broken up by the insistent questions and the mood of dawning horror in the discovery of Rousseau the verse is paced with admirable precision. Because of this we are able to apprehend the horror that the speaker of the poem feels. Rousseau's interruption - "Life" - comes after the narrator has announced the question that he hasn't asked: "is all here amiss?" This reversal of ordinary expectations vividly simulates the way in which the experiences the narrator is privy to are marked by a sense of dislocation and unreality. The same vision that the narrator experiences here reemerges later as a vision within Rousseau's vision, as he is to recount. The visions merge into each other; what *has* altered is the perspective of the speakers; their experiences are governed by an underlying circularity which is also reflected in the poem's central images. These images are constantly modified, extended, and reworked so that our apprehension has to take on board the fact of their changeability and the accompanying disorientation. This provisionality is seen by J. Hillis Miller as all-encompassing to the extent that it creates the need for a system of identification by opposition: 'As soon as something can be seen and therefore named, it must be seen and named according to antitheses.'²⁸

The aside in line 181 is another instance of Shelley's artistry. Even in the midst of the realisation of Rousseau's identity the narrator still finds time to insert this cry from the heart which does not jar with the other lines but provides a moment of suspension which is the more poignant for its hushed air. The next lines pick up the mood of horror that culminates in a matter-of-fact description of Rousseau's hair and eyes, both now emblems of a human identity that has been distorted beyond all recognition. Rousseau is neither man nor object, and we are unsure of his status. Unlike Dante's Virgil who brings with him the authority and

assurance of a moral code, Shelley's Rousseau hovers in a limbo between the notions of guide and victim. Our reactions to him, like those of the narrator, can have no easy recourse to the trappings of a moral system. His physical state corresponds to the ambivalence of his meaning. The narrator encounters a figure who elucidates only by offering him a version of events that he himself has, in part, already experienced. Rousseau is only an imperfect exegete. He answers some of the narrator's questions but in doing so only precipitates further, more fundamental and more unresolvable questions to do with human origin and destiny. Thus it can be seen that Rousseau's ability to suggest illumination but inability to deliver it is one of the main strands of indeterminacy in the poem.

iv

The clearest statement of the theme of 'tempering' in the poem occurs at lines 240 to 243 of Rousseau's monologue. It is worth pausing to dwell on the ambivalent implications of the word. In a positive sense, 'temper' suggests the idea of coming to terms with something; in a negative sense, the word suggests compromise that is corrupting. In this part of the monologue the second of these meanings is inherent: "I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object." (240-243) As discussed earlier the comment is an offshoot of Shelley's reading of Rousseau; the rest of the speech also utilizes some of Rousseau's ideas, while giving them a Shelleyan edge. For example, later on in the same speech Rousseau talks of the contrast between himself and the classical writers that were able to master their emotions. He, on the other hand, is a victim of them:

" - I

Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain! -

"And so my words were seeds of misery -
Even as the deeds of others." -

(278-281)

The passage amalgamates some of Shelley's key concerns: namely, the way in which poetry and life interact and feed off each other and the manner in which literature may be either cathartic or corrupting. (In *Julian and Maddalo* Maddalo makes a similar observation: "'Most wretched men / Are cradled into poetry by wrong, / They learn in suffering what they teach in song.'" (544-546)) Rousseau's utterance (278-281) expresses one of the historical Rousseau's misgivings about art in general, a misgiving that he articulated in his early work, the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750). As Maurice Cranston puts it in his edition of the *Discourse*, 'Rousseau [had] invoked the authority of Plato to support his case; for had not Plato said that all so-called scientific knowledge was not knowledge at all, and proposed that poets and artists be banned from an ideal republic?'²⁹ This view is propounded in Plato's *Republic* in a passage that highlights the damaging effects inherent in the liberation of emotion that poetry induces:

... the poet gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires of a part of us, which we forcibly restrain in our private misfortunes, with its hunger for tears and for an uninhibited indulgence in grief ... very few people are capable of realizing that what we feel for other people must infect what we feel for ourselves, and that if we let our pity for the misfortunes of others grow too strong it will be difficult to restrain our feelings in our own.³⁰

The passage from Plato advocates a need for the application of a moderation that Rousseau has neither practised in his art nor his life. But though Rousseau sees

his own shortcomings the portrait of him that Shelley gives us also suggests that he still harbours feelings of pride and considers his achievements in a noble light, but nothing he says can alter the narrow limits of his creativity's emotional spectrum:

"I

Am one of those who have created, even

"If it be but a world of agony." -

(293-295)

Rousseau realises that his 'passions have made [him]... live, and [his]... passions have killed [him]' ³¹ but he does not have the necessary resolve to restrain the passions within a classical framework. Towards the end of his life Shelley realised that notions that had previously had a cherished place in his outlook on life were more destructive than productive because of the impossibility of realising these notions within an environment that was more distorting than ideal. He, like Rousseau, had set his sights too high. In this extract Shelley talks of love in very sober and sobering terms: ' - Where two or three are gathered together the devil is among them, and good far more than evil impulses - love far more than hatred - has been to me, except as you [Mary Shelley] have been it's object, the source of all sort[s] of mischief.' (15 August 1821) ³²

v

Rousseau's recounting of his experience by the rivulet of line 314 suggests the way in which the natural world of the poem is disorientatingly attended by forgetfulness. Initially this is comforting to Rousseau; later it translates into the

shape all light's trampling of the gazer's thoughts 'into the dust of death' (388), in itself an echo of the chariot that destroys the youths and maidens of line 149. Rousseau's state of oblivion is only the more marked after he drinks from the cup that the shape all light offers him. This drink is like a post-lapsarian eating of an apple that at once creates knowledge that, in its very infiniteness, is destructive. This part of the poem seems to have in mind a part of Shelley's essay 'On Life' (1819): 'We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments ... 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?' ³³ Shelley's questioning mingles rhetoric and despair as the limits of human ignorance unveil themselves. Clearly Rousseau, in this part of the poem, is brought face to face with 'the dark abyss of - how little we know.' ³⁴ Harold Bloom sees the poem, in this section, as corresponding to a Wordsworthian sense of growing up. ³⁵ The line that comes to mind is from the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* (first published 1807): 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting'. (58) ³⁶ But the stanza that this line comes from is, as Bloom recognizes, characterised by a reassuring rhythm at odds with the urgency of Shelley's poem:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory we do come
 From God, who is our home ...

(59-65) ³⁷

Wordsworth is assured of the 'glory' that the Soul trails behind it. The lines are governed by a mood of moderation and harmony and in the parallel phrases of

lines 62 and 63 there is a limiting that actually allows for other possibilities. In Wordsworth's lines there is a benignity that suggests the power of faith and the assurance of a knowledge that is external to the immediate context and is therefore the more stabilizing. Shelley, on the other hand, lets us perceive Rousseau's situation more intensely as Rousseau recreates his sense of fascination and bewilderment:

"I arose and for a space

The scene of woods and waters seemed to keep,

"Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace

Of light diviner than the common Sun

Sheds on the common Earth, but all the place

"Was filled with many sounds woven into one

Oblivious melody, confusing sense

Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun;

"And as I looked the bright omnipresence

Of morning through the orient cavern flowed,

And the Sun's image radiantly intense

"Burned on the waters of the well that glowed

Like gold, and threaded all the forest maze

With winding paths of emerald fire - there stood

"Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze

Of his own glory, on the vibrating

Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,

"A shape all light, which with one hand did fling
Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn
Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing

"A silvery music on the mossy lawn,
And still before her on the dusky grass
Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn. -

(335-357)

The passage is alive with a sense of discovery fraught with otherworldliness. At lines 337 to 338 the phrase 'a gentle trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun' is both suggestive of delicacy and inexhaustibility: the light seems to come from an unearthly source, as normal modes of natural operation are displaced. 'Many sounds woven into one / Oblivious memory, confusing sense / Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun' (340-343) conveys a distortion of purity. The therapeutic 'sound' of line 318 is now replaced by a more predatory sensation, as sense is 'confused' - a movement paralleled in the complementary feel of 'the gliding waves' (suggestive of animation) and 'shadows dun' (suggestive of stasis).

The sun, at this point in the poem, takes on a quality of intensity that is acute almost to the point of unbearability. The clause that begins 'And the Sun's image' (345) grows more tortuous as it progresses, reflecting the way the 'fire' of line 348 spreads, engulfing the forest even as it puts it into focus. The next lines are full of monosyllables all indicative of brilliance: 'blaze'; 'glory'; 'rays'. The verbs 'vibrating' and 'flashing' merge into one. The Shape all Light appears in the midst of great natural splendour, but from the very first her identity is ambiguous: '*as if she were the Dawn*' (353; my italics). The language of this part of the poem is involved in its own configurations: 'Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing'

and 'Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn. - ' (354 and 357) are lines that delight in their own inventiveness. The Shape suggests a chameleon, representative both of natural harmony and of an aberration from it. It adapts to its environment with protean effortlessness and offers both salvation and temptation. This duality makes the moral status of the Shape ambiguous. At the core of the poem is a poetic emblem we are tempted to interpret as elucidatory, loaded as this emblem is by suggestions of divinity and transfiguration and yet the dual status that Shelley has provided for it makes it possible to say only that as a symbol it clarifies less than it complicates. As Rousseau puts it later he is caught 'between desire and shame' (394) and this very unresolvability that thrives on opposition is the proper reaction, indeed the only one, that an emblem of such provisionality could elicit. Like Rousseau we are caught between the desire to interpret and the inability to do so. The reader's reactions echo the protagonists' and lend the poem a resonance that can only stem from a poetic system of rigorously worked out open-endedness.

Just as we begin to conclude that the Shape is no more than an embellishment of natural dexterity and glory the poem homes in on an image that could not be more concrete:

"And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

"All that was seemed as if it had been not,
As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

"Trampled its fires into the dust of death" ...

(382-388)

Flux is at the core of these lines: literally, in the Shape's movement of her feet, and metaphorically in the way in which the Shape's predatory quality has suddenly been unveiled. The very effortlessness of the blotting out of the 'thoughts of him who gazed', accompanied as it is by the 'sweet tune' of line 382 makes this annihilation the more disturbing. The image of the embers points to the way the Shape consumes its victims. Rousseau's question is ill-judged and the natural simile used to describe Rousseau's rising ("And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand / Of dewy morning's vital alchemy, / I rose"(401-403)) reflects the way in which the Shape all Light is master of the elements that are in thrall to her distorted utilization of them. The description of the way in which Rousseau's brain is wiped clean so that it resembles sand, formless and blank, vividly captures the instant at which control is lost:

"I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
And suddenly my brain became as sand

"Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador,
Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed

"Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
Until the second bursts" ...

(403-410)

These lines are followed by a return of the original vision that the narrator of the poem first experienced. They represent the last moment after which Rousseau will be assimilated into the 'sad pageantry' of line 176. What strikes one about

the passage is the way in which the verse's construction never impedes the flow of fluidity, complex and involved as the syntax is. There is the impression of several things all happening at once within a split second as the reader is inundated with image after image: the 'sand', the 'first wave', the 'track of deer' and the 'fierce wolf'. Even in the midst of this speed and urgency the poetry finds time to trace its images with an exactingness that is compelling: 'Where the first wave had more than half erased' is a line of precision. What is intriguing about this precision is the way in which Shelley is at such pains to be scrupulous about imaginative figurations that are so radically divorced from the common arena of human experience. It is this scrupulousness that lets the reader apprehend and enter the innermost parts of Rousseau's psyche.

The suppressed pride earlier noted in Rousseau's character creeps into lines 460 to 468 which describe his assimilation into 'the thickest billows of the living storm' (466):

"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, and bared my bosom to the clime

Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform. -

This listing of some of the motifs of the poem - the flowers, shadows, and the stream - comes almost in the manner of a summation. The lines signal a

watershed, things can no longer be the same. The tone is one of resignation tinged with defiance, a poignancy that is self-destructive. 'I plunged', arriving as it does last, after an accumulation of inverse constructions beginning with 'me', has the feel of an affirmative release that rings out but this phrase actually denotes the reverse: a moment of negation in which Rousseau, despite his heroic, or more exactly foolhardy, approach, allows himself to lose himself irretrievably by this involvement in the distorting and disfiguring 'life' of the poem. Rousseau's tries to be an act of defiance but he himself knows that such defiance is already an admission of defeat. Similarly, 'and bared my bosom to the clime / Of that cold light', though weighted with alliterative stability, is clearly not about the well-being that might go hand in hand with this stylistic stoicism. 'Bared my bosom' and 'clime / Of that cold light' are phrases that suggest the vulnerability of nakedness and the unrelentingness of vehemence respectively. The remainder of the speech is characterised by a tone of anonymity; in particular, lines 490 to 500 reiterate a mood of despair and the abdication of responsibility. Human behaviour no longer elicits individual interpretation but merely conforms to patterns of activity that are impersonal and animalistic.

In the following lines towards the end of Rousseau's speech the rhythm of the verse echoes the meaning of dissipation that it carries, a dissipation that is methodical, inevitable and continuous:

"after brief space

From every form the beauty slowly waned,

"From every firmest limb and fairest face

The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left

The action and the shape without the grace

"Of life; the marble brow of youth was cleft

With care, and in the eyes where once hope shone
Desire like a lioness bereft

"Of its last cub, glared ere it died; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown

"In Autumn evening from a poplar tree" ...
(518-529)

The last two lines - a clear remembrance of ' yet so / Was borne amid the crowd, as through the sky / One of the million leaves of summer's bier. - '(49-50) - make us feel that we have just witnessed a scene that we are already familiar with, and, like the narrator, have been privy to the sense of *déjà-vu* that he related in the last two tercets of the prologue. The circle is complete as the reader, like the narrator, enters the frame of the poem in this final apprehension of circularity in a work that is so much about movement and repetition. Our apprehension of the feeling of *déjà-vu* indicates the manner in which the poem allows the reader to step inside the frame of the emotional and psychological states in question. Hand in hand with this immediacy comes an accompanying inscrutability. The poem seems to suggest that any definitive meaning can only reside within the boundaries of this immediacy and not outside it - in other words the reader is required merely to absorb the experiences of the poem and not interpret them.

As we near the fragment's end the sense of having arrived at its beginning is curiously inconclusive. This circularity does not imply continuity but instead suggests the irreversibility of change. Both Narrator and Rousseau are not the same; the former is metaphorically altered by Rousseau's account, the latter literally altered by 'Life'. This flux that beats at the poem's heart undermines the reader's urge to find emblems of constancy in the poem. The final question,

"Then, what is Life?" (544) remains fittingly unanswered. Fittingly because the previous questions have only engendered further ones, each in turn more aware of the threshold that separates the need to articulate and the knowledge of uncertainty.

In a sense the whole poem has already answered the final question that ends it, a fact that illustrates the ongoing nature of the quest for illumination. The suggestion is that though the question now no longer needs to be asked the narrator cannot resist the urge to ask it, despite having just received an answer. He cannot resist the urge because the answer he has received is no longer an adequate one by the time he comes to ask the question. Too much has been taken on board, too much has changed. The poem's movements represent a continual, unrelenting failure to keep up with the change that makes meanings either inadequate or impossible. But the representation is, in itself, a brilliant success.

The reader's final impression of the work must be dependent upon whether he sees it as an attempt to elucidate or merely as an attempt to articulate. There is at once too much and too little to grasp onto in *The Triumph of Life*, too much in the sense that the world of the poem is exactly and exhaustively drawn, and too little in that its meaning is elusive and opaque. Like the other poems that this study has addressed, *The Triumph of Life's* eloquence and greatness remains inseparable from Shelley's realisation that to write is to avail himself of, and resign himself to, the creativity and ambiguity that uncertainty brings. The poem illustrates the drive in Shelley to find answers, a drive that precipitates his language's ingenuity and inventiveness. Its obsessive metaphors, ambivalent symbols and resistance to interpretation are indicative of Shelley's realisation of how hard it is to come up with answers. The poem, like all the works this study has examined, finds its terminus not at the point at which it breaks off, but in the response that it yields from any given reader. Shelley's indeterminate texts allow the reader to channel his own subjective perceptions into them and so lend them an objectivity that has its roots not within the internal content of the poem but

within the provisionalities of his own external response. The dialogue between text and reader is an ongoing, dynamic and enriching one and is bound up with the greatness and vitality of Shelley's verse.

Notes

Introduction

1. Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 109.
2. Cronin, p. x.
3. For instances of this see 'On Life': 'words abandon us' (*PP*, p. 478); Shelley's note to 'On Love': 'These words are inefficient and metaphorical - Most words so - No help - ' (*PP*, p. 474, note 2); 'Speculations on Metaphysics': 'Our words are dead' (Julian, vol. vii, p. 62); *Prometheus Unbound*: 'words are quick and vain' (I. 303); *The Cenci*: 'of all words, / That minister to mortal intercourse, / Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell / My misery ' (III. i. 111-4); *Epipsychidion*: 'The winged words on which my soul would pierce ... Are chains of lead'(588-90); *Julian and Maddalo*: 'How vain / Are words!' (472-3).
4. From the *Four Quartets* ('East Coker') by T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (first pub. 1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 198.
5. J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. xiv, hereafter Hillis Miller.
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