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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps only The Cenci approaches the same degree of disillusionment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## A CRITICAL HISTORY.

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

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

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

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

### I. Idealist Approaches

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neville Rogers, in Shelley At Work: A Critical

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

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

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

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

Exemplary of the contradictory responses to this

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

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

poem, the commentary by Roland A. Duerksen in Shelley's Poetry of Involvement<sup>12</sup> shows a similar humanistic idealism to that in Milne's essay, but arrives at a very different reading of the poem. Duerksen believes Shelley's philosophy was based on two precepts: "the freedom of the individual mind to make its own choices", and that same mind's responsibility to promote equal freedom amongst all human beings (p.6). This fusion of rationalism and social responsibility was effected through love, a self-generated "urge toward union or community with another" (p.32). Duerksen believes that "The Triumph" upholds this doctrine, by showing how humanity imprisons itself by refusing to trust the mind as the instrument to freedom. The chariot of Life is a mental construct, a result of this limited vision. 'Real' life is available to humanity, if each individual will trust to his or her own reason. Thus, what Milne sees as the cause of corruption, Duerksen sees as the saviour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Baker's reading was not the first of the more pessimistic commentaries on "The Triumph of Life". Carl Grabo, in The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought<sup>16</sup> gives a strongly autobiographical background to the poem, emphasising the tremendous difficulties Shelley faced in his later life. Again, a strong neo-platonic atmosphere is invoked: the world is utterly corrupted but a Divine Reality exists, of which the Shape all light is the guardian. She gives Rousseau a vision of Life as it really is, and as Grabo believed Shelley saw it. The poem illustrates, for Grabo, Shelley's rejection of the world for a reality of the mind, an inner life of thought that was intuitively neo-platonic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>25</sup> John A. Hodgson, "'The World's Mysterious Doom': Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", ELH, XL11, 4 (Winter, 1975), 595-622.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## II. Metaphoric Approaches

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Jean Hall's thesis in The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetry<sup>33</sup> also adopts a positive interpretation of Shelleyan language theories. She retraces Shelley's philosophical roots in British empiricism and Godwinism to show that Shelley saw the impossibility of an ontology as exhilarating and freeing. Poetry can dissolve the meaning-through-habit process that is our usual experience by applying new contexts to static visual images in the poetry, so creating a new, unified perspective. This is not a platonic, transcendent unity, but a self-created, language-conceived, constantly changing unity. Hall applies this rather sketchily to "The Triumph of Life", arguing that the hell of illusion in which the multitude and Rousseau are immersed is a result of their misuse of the 'transforming images', and as such is self-created. She believes that the Shape all light is such an

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

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

The tendency with these representational readings is towards a growing pessimism. Tillottama Rajan's book Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism<sup>34</sup> could be placed at an intermediate point on the spectrum, exploring as it does deconstruction in the Romantics. Rajan defines deconstruction as a dismantling of the overt, authorized meaning of the text by a subconscious meaning that runs counter to the authorized meaning, thus revealing disunity and potential collapse.<sup>35</sup> The Romantics' 'text' of the idealizing imagination is thus undermined by a subconscious subtext that shows their poetic constructions to be solipsistically-created and therefore unrelated to any reality. In her chapter on Shelley entitled "Visionary and Questioner: Idealism and Scepticism in Shelley's Poetry", Rajan argues that Shelley's idealism is not replaced by scepticism, but is rather postponed. In "The Triumph of Life", however, Shelley depicts a confrontation between a visionary and a sceptic, and as the poem proceeds, the subtext of doubt emerges and disrupts the text, rendering all the symbols ambiguous as they change in signification. The poem's process shows how good and bad are inextricably intertwined, and when both Rousseau and the speaker realise this, the need for a transcendent ideal is revised and life accepted. This achievement of 'purgatorial wisdom' releases one's

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

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

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

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

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

William Keach's penetrating analysis of Shelley's stylistic methods in Shelley's Style<sup>37</sup> does not give a

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

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

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

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

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

random and finally uncontrollable.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

In "The Triumph of Life" Hogle believes that

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

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

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

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Hogle's reading concludes this brief critical

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