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Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": the Absence of an Audience

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"The Triumph of Life" has proven to be a notoriously difficult poem as past criticisms have demonstrated. It evades a clear cut reading as other good poems tend to do. This is not due to a vagueness of Shelley's work but to a richness in imagery and symbolism. Some of these past criticisms also serve as an alarm to seeking rational coherence in a poem which essentially does not share the same logic as that of a prose. In elucidating the meaning of the poem, many eminent critics have proven that it can be undertaken from various aspects: G. M. Mathews shed light on the relationship between Shelley and Jane Williams concluding that it was more than a friendship which Shelley embedded in the poem; Edward Duffy examined extensively the role of Rousseau; John A. Hogson pointed out the significance of the influence of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality"; Donald L. Maddox raised the possibility that the *Alastor* poet was modeled after Rousseau, therefore suggesting a strong link between *Alastor* and "The Triumph of Life"; and Donald H. Reiman provided a comprehensive analysis including the influences of Milton's *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Ezekiel to list a few of the prominent literature he cited⁽¹⁾.

Although Shelley's failure with the reading public has been noted as a significant factor for his pessimism in "The Triumph of Life", its contributing force to the poem has not been fully taken into account. This essay attempts at pursuing this perspective further by examining

why Rousseau became the main guide and what the speaker of Shelley's persona sought in this poem. It will be undertaken by comparing the poem to *Alastor* which shares a similar theme to "The Triumph of Life": it is particularly instructive in the sense that Shelley became active in his social role as a poet after his publication of *Alastor* and that "The Triumph of Life" came after this attempt. The depiction of Rousseau in "The Triumph of Life" will then be examined since he serves as the warning guide.

"The Triumph of Life"⁽²⁾ opens with the break of day, with the change from night to day serving as a metaphorical transition of what is to occur later in the poem. The sun is described as gradually taking over the light of the stars, depicting an instance of an earthly perception erasing a celestial one: "As veil by veil the silent splendour drops / From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite / 'Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops ..." (413-15), and "Although unseen is felt by one who hopes / "That his day's path may end as he began it / In that star's smile" (417-19). It can be argued that one of the main concerns of "The Triumph of Life" is, as the title suggests, the persevering power which brings the luminaries down to earth: both the speaker and Rousseau experience this with the difference being that Rousseau outlives the blow whereas the speaker does not. This transition in perception is almost always preceded by a vision seen in a reverie-like state⁽³⁾. The moment when the change from night to day occurs presents an intermediary state, symbolic of the condition in which Shelley believed a vision could be seen. He describes in full detail its nature through the voice of the speaker :

When a strange trance over my fancy grew
Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread
Was so transparent that the scene came through
As clear as when a veil of light is dawn
O'er evening hills they glimmer; (29-33)

As Shelley described the state of a reverie as to “precede, or accompany, or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life”, thus the vision works as an awakening force for the ones in question: the speaker undergoes a change in his perception just as Rousseau, after meeting the “Shape all light”, fails to see the innocent and beautiful state of the environment which once surrounded him. However, one must note the differences in the nature of their visions: Rousseau’s already undergone vision is embedded in the speaker’s present vision. In the case of the former, his life story is given which enables us to speculate how and “by what paths” this change took place; but in the case of the speaker, we are thrust upon the moment when the change is taking place without any knowledge of his past nor future: “But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold” (21).

In the Preface to *Alastor*, he explains how a “Power... strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences”. As much as this was the theme of *Alastor*, one can argue that it was that of “The Triumph of Life” with a slight modification. Shelley carries on to contrast these luminaries to the “meaner spirits” whom the ‘Power’ “dooms to a slow and poisonous decay” and whose “destiny is more abject and inglorious as their delinquency is more contemptible and pernicious”. These two parties appear equally in “The Triumph of Life” whereas only the luminary takes part in *Alastor*.

In “The Triumph of Life”, what the speaker sees in the beginning

of the vision are the mean spirits mentioned above: “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” (44-49). With the arrival of a chariot, he sees “The million with fierce song and maniac dance / raging around” (110-11) until “the fiery band which held / Their natures, snaps” (157-58) and “Yet ere I can say where the chariot hath / Past over them; not other trace I find / But as of foam after the Ocean’s wrath / Is spent upon the desert shore” (161-164). The aged on the other hand “Sink and corruption veils them as they lie—/ And frost in these performs what fire in those” (174-75). Among this “deluded crew” he finds what was once Rousseau. However he proves not to be one of the multitude who were ran over by the chariot, nor among the captives—“The Wise, / ‘The great, the unforgotten: who wore / Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreathes of light, / Signs of thought’s empire over thought” (208-221)⁽⁴⁾ —but somewhere in between these captives and the unseen “sacred few who could not tame / Their spirits to the Conqueror” (128-29)⁽⁵⁾.

Rousseau’s dominant role in this poem deserves full attention, for not only does he serve as the guide to this pageant of “[t]he mighty phantoms of an elder day” but he gives out the secrets of his own life story. He starts out by explaining how “In the April prime / When all the forest tops began to burn with kindling green, touched by the azure clime / Of the young year,” he found himself “asleep / Under a mountain, which from unknown time / “Had yawned into a cavern high and deep” (308-13). This environment makes a striking contrast to that in which the speaker found the aimless crowd, which was destitute of nature: “birds within the noonday ether lost; / Upon that path where flowers never grew” (64-65). It was also under an “Oblivious spell”:

And from it came a gentle rivulet
Whose water like clear air in its calm sweep

“Bent the soft grass and kept forever wet
The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove
With sound which all who hear must needs forget

“All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love,
Which they had known before that hour of rest :

(314-320)

We are told that the multitude “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” (66-69), who also remained ignorant of the “violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they / Pursued their serious folly as of old... (72-3). This description suggests that Rousseau is not actually displaced to a different environment from that in which the crowd exists, but that he possesses a certain kind of ability to perceive what is equally there for others. At this point, Rousseau still retained the celestial sensibility, i. e., “the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit”. What this state symbolises has been one of the central concerns of critical debate⁽⁶⁾. Although I prefer to avoid attaching any specific stages to this, it seems to me that it represents innocence at Rousseau’s height of sensibility. Innocence, because woe in life can not affect the spirit : “Thou wouldst forget thus vainly to deplore / ‘Ills, which if ill, can find no cure from thee, / The thought of which no other sleep will quell / Nor other music blot from memory—” (327-30), and also at the height of his sensibility because he is in full contact with nature.

Rousseau reaches a turning point when he encounters “A Shape all

light” whose feet seemed “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” (383–88). In delineating the change currently taking place, Shelley once again uses the night to day motif: “like day she came, / Making the night a dream” (392–93). In response to Rousseau’s question “shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—” (398) she tells him to “Arise and quench thy thirst” (400). As soon as he preforms this act, his “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” (405–410). His mind become that of a Lockean model in which sensory perceptions mark the mind⁽⁷⁾. The first impressions are “fears, hatreds, and evil thought” which Shelley often associated with hunting dogs that pursue a deer⁽⁸⁾. Also, taking into consideration the myth of Actaeon and an image based on it in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, one can even suggest that this metaphor implies a sensual desire on Rousseau’s part: the *Confession* was seen at the time as full of sensuality⁽⁹⁾. As a result of this change, the “fair shape waned in the coming light” of the “cold bright car”. Shelley compared this with Lucifer, whose light diminishes as the sun rises: again we come across Shelley’s favourite motif.

This change can partly be explained by Shelley’s differences in tone in speaking about Rousseau’s two works — *Julie ; ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Confessions*. After reading the former work Shelley found in it “the divine beauty of Rousseau’s imagination⁽¹⁰⁾” whereas for the latter he concluded that “the ‘Confessions’ of Rousseau ... are either a disgrace to the confessor, or a string of falsehoods, probably the latter⁽¹¹⁾”. What can be deduced from the shift of visions is that

Rousseau's imagination as found in the ideal beauty of *Julie* gave way to the worldly sensations inferred in the *Confessions*, which gradually brought him to wretchedness: "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" (465-68).

Shelley already dealt with a similar kind of disillusionment in *Alastor*. The poet who seeks the *beau idéal* awakens to cold reality after seeing a vision of "an intelligence similar to itself". Shelley explains in the preface that the "Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin". This is another example of "Life" striking one of "the luminaries of this world with sudden darkness and extinction", and the poet is compelled to surrender to its power. Rousseau takes a course different from that of the poet: "For in the battle Life and they did wage / She remained conqueror — I was overcome / By my own heart alone, which neither age / 'Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object" (240-43). Maddox argued that Rousseau reached "a self-sufficiency in solitude" by the time he wrote the *Rêveries*⁽¹²⁾ and it can be argued that this attitude was reflected in "The Triumph of Life"⁽¹³⁾.

Just as this new vision of the car brought Rousseau to see "this harsh world in which I wake to weep" (334), the fact that Shelley's persona witnessed the same car for the first time suggests that the moment approached when he had to face reality. In *Alastor*, such possibility was only foreshadowed in the fate of the poet. It is instructive to speculate what brought him closer to the poet figure in *Alastor* and what he was attempting in this poem.

As *Alastor* served as an alarm to the danger of "self-centred seclusion", Shelley increasingly grew away from this attitude as may be proven from his growing awareness of social responsibilities. He pub-

lished his “first serious appeal to the public” in 1817 as *The Revolt of Islam*: “It is an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and the refined⁽¹⁴⁾”. The significant social context of this poem is the influence of the French Revolution and its disastrous consequences which characterised the age with “gloom and misanthropy”. He tells us that he composed the poem in the belief that he sees a “slow, gradual silent change”.

The Revolt of Islam offers an extended investigation of the relation between public and private life through the two main characters, Laon and Cythna. They are lovers as well as equal participants in the bloodless revolution. What is of interest is that their private and public lives coincide: they have an ideal relationship based on mutual respect and love, the principle of which Cythna follows to fight for the liberation of enslaved women. In the course of their revolution against despotism, they enlighten the people with words of wisdom and love without becoming prone to “Revenge, or Envy, or Prejudice”, the consequence of which is the bloodless dethronement of tyranny. Cythna attempts to instil hope when the revolution is defeated by a despotic force just as hope is crucial for Cythna when she is taken captive.

Shelley depicted Laon and Cythna as embodying the ideal principle that should have infused the whole of society, thereby transforming it. Their success in bringing about the revolution signified a hope to be realised within actual society. In this sense, Shelley invited the readers to participate in their own liberation. As Laon and Cythna were able to effect it through imaginative processes, Shelley, through this very poetry, aspired to do the same with his reading public.

Shelley seems to have been particularly anxious for the poem to reach a wide audience. His letters to his publisher, Ollier, shows his

great enthusiasm for its advertisement and reviews: "I wish, on publication, copies to be sent to all the principle Reviewers" (*Complete Works* 9: 272; 22 December 1817); "Keep it well advertised" (*Complete Works* 9: 279; January 1818); "don't relax in the advertising ... If you see any reviews or notices of it in any periodical paper pray send it me" (*Complete Works* 9: 281; January 1818); "You ought to continue to advertise the poem vigorously" (*Complete Works* 9: 283; 25 January 1818)⁽¹⁵⁾.

However earnest he was in attaining positive reception, it turned out to be a disappointment. Apart from Hunt's favourable review in the *Examiner*, the *Monthly Magazine*, *British Critic* and, in particular, the *Quarterly*, responded otherwise. Far from Shelley's expectations, "[i]n London society Shelley's name gained currency for atheism and immorality rather than for poetry"⁽¹⁶⁾. Apart from biographical criticisms the work was often accused as being obscure. This failure to capture a considerable readership came as a blow to the poet and encouraged him to choose exile⁽¹⁷⁾.

In *Prometheus Unbound* which was an expression of the poet's "passion for reforming the world" (as was *The Revolt of Islam*), Shelley significantly altered the possible scope of his reading public by limiting it to "the more select classes of poetical readers" who "would understand perfectly and would approve entirely the least of his words, the most subtle of his intentions"⁽¹⁸⁾. Thus, *Prometheus Unbound*, which was intended for the ideal reader, makes a striking contrast to *the Revolt of Islam*, which attempted at direct engagement with the general reading public. *Prometheus Unbound* can be read as a purely psychological strife within the self, which provides no role for the masses. Only those who are able to appreciate it are invited to partake in the imaginative process. It is a "corrective enlightenment" of the

elite in the poet's belief "that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness⁽¹⁹⁾.

Shelley continued to be concerned with the effect of his work, demonstrating a lower level of confidence than he had for *The Revolt of Islam*. The preface to *Prometheus Unbound* reads more like a defence against the critics who attacked him following his former work than a direct appeal to the reader ;

whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them; if his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown (136).

The reception of the work was unfavourable as that for the *Revolt of Islam*. The *Quarterly* was again hostile toward it. One of the few positive responses came from *Blackwood's* which praised Shelley's poetical practice but condemned "the principles and purposes of Mr. Shelley's poetry" in this work as "more indisguisedly pernicious... than even in the Revolt of Islam". The book failed to sell, the "[p]ublic opinion was against Shelley's work in London, and the book was regarded as disruptable rather than daring⁽²⁰⁾".

Shelley's growing awareness of his failure with the reading public⁽²¹⁾ probably led him to accept his "unaccomplished purpose" to "produce a systematical history of what appear[s]... to be the genuine elements of human society" (preface, *PU*). It is likely that he saw in

Rousseau his possible future state in which the indifferent mass would have destroyed his sensibility. Thus, Rousseau appears as a warner as well as a guide for the speaker. However, as Rousseau tells him, to “Follow thou, and from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness, / ‘And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn / From thee (305-8)”, Shelley yet had to find out for himself.

“The Triumph of Life” does not provide us with any solutions to the questions it raises. However, what may be said of the poem is that it successfully renders an intense understanding of Shelley’s state of mind in 1822, a mind which was probably seeking a direction. The poem is full of verbs working toward the future. Shelley’s recognition of his lack of power to exert any effect on the public seemed to have left him with the choice of either seeking shadows or turning to inaction. On the one hand, there was Shelley’s idea of the role of the poet as defined in *A Defence of Poetry*, which, as he expressed in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound* he sought to follow. On the other hand, the public opinion seemed to be against him. There were also reversed cases: Byron for example, whom Shelley acknowledged as his only rival, succeeded in attaining public praise, yet in Shelley’s opinion his poetry wanted “within itself the germs of a permanent relation to the present, and to all succeeding ages⁽²²⁾”. According to Shelley, Wordsworth spoiled his talent by employing it for the ‘wrong ends⁽²³⁾. This incongruity of ‘will’ and ‘power’ became a central concern for Shelley in “The Triumph of Life”: “And much I grieve to think how power and will / In opposition rule our mortal day ... / And why God made irreconcilable / Good and the means of good” (228-321). A prominent example of this was the French Revolution which ended in the hands of Napoleon. Rousseau who was later associated with the Revolution says “ I / Am one of those who have created, even / “ If it

be but a world of agony..." (293-95).

Rousseau became an important figure in Shelley's mind, not only because he was a representative figure of the Enlightenment and his writings embodied true imagination which Shelley worshipped, but for his failure in public life. His religious views which he expressed in his works were the cause of his persecution, and his creativity was destroyed by his paranoiac distrust of other people. In a similar manner, Shelley's poetry in general was no longer appreciated as poetry but consumed, if not ignored, as pieces of gossip regarding his private life or with distaste for its radicalism. Under such circumstances, Shelley had to resort to a future audience who would be able to appreciate his art in the way he intended: "The decision of the cause whether or no *I* am a poet is removed from the present time to the hour when our posterity shall assemble" (10: 333; Oct. 1821). Shelley believed in the redeeming nature of time as he wrote in *A Defence of Poetry* :

Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a peculator, that Raphael was a libertine, that Spenser was a poet laureate. ... Their errors have been weighed and found to have been washed and found to have been dust in the balance ; if their sins were as scarlet, they are now white as snow : they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and the redeemer, Time (*Complete Works* 7: 138).

Rousseau had already shown him an example of his reliance on the future public to correct history in *The Confessions*⁽²⁴⁾ :

I know that I was represented in the world under features so unlike my own and at times so distorted, that notwithstanding my faults, none of which I intended to pass over, I could not

help gaining by showing myself as I was.

In "The Triumph of Life", Shelley does not have a specific reader in mind as he did in his other works, but appeals directly to a future audience who would act as the judge of his poetic merits. Just as Rousseau and the speaker were able to place the past "luminaries of the world" according to their contributions, the speaker sought how he would figure in the pageant.

"The Triumph of Life" is not altogether pessimistic as one is easily led to believe, but becomes so when it is restricted to the time span of Shelley's own age. If we consider the fact that in this poem Shelley deals with 'Time' that transcends this by creating past history and also the future by becoming history himself, we can say that he is engaging himself in an universal "Life". As an example of public failure, Shelley took a similar path as that of Rousseau by seeking the future. However, what may be noted as the differences between the two are that Rousseau wrote the *Confessions* as a legacy to his life whereas Shelley was still much engaged in it while writing "The Triumph of Life". By the very act of writing, Shelley most likely tried to work out the dilemma he was caught in. But as the poem remained unfinished, the solution to this problem also remained unsolved.

Notes

- (1) See respectively G. M. Mathews, "On Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", *Studia Neophilologica* 34 (1962) : Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England : The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1979); John A. Hodgson, "The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'", *ELH* 42 (1975) : 595-622; Donald L. Maddox, "Shelley's *Alastor* and the Legacy of Rousseau", *Studies in Romanticism* 9 (1970) : 82-98; Donald H. Reiman, "A Reading of 'The Triumph of Life'", *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical study* (New York : Octagon

Books, 1979): 19-86.

- (2) Both texts, *Alastor* and "The Triumph of Life", are from Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 1977).
- (3) In "The Triumph of Life", both the speaker and Rousseau experience this vision. In *Alastor*, which will be later mentioned in detail, a similar vision to that of Rousseau's appears.
- (4) Shelley lists Napoleon, Voltaire, King Frederick II, Kant, Czarina Catherine II, and Leopold II as the examples.
- (5) "The sacred few (128) include the leading representatives of the Hellenic and Hebraic civilization, among them Socrates and Jesus" (footnote in the Norton Critical Edition).
- (6) See Hodgson pp. 597-98: Carlos Baker's opinion is that it represents Rousseau's birth; Harold Bloom disagrees with this on the basis that it is "not ... about the process of birth but about about the process of 'growing up'" [Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Ithaca; Cornell UP, 1969): 263-64] ; Donald H. Reiman takes a compromising view of the two — "Rousseau's awakening to self-consciousness occurs sometime after birth itself" (Reiman 60); and Edward Bostetter detaches it from any real stages in life. In addition to this list Hodgson further adds his own interpretation, i. e. that it represents death.
- (7) One will recall that Romantics such as Coleridge and Shelley later rebelled against such empirical model of the mind to uphold imagination.
- (8) See *Prometheus Unbound* Act I, II. 452-27, and the footnote in the Norton critical edition.
- (9) See Duffy, pp. 32-53.
- (10) Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck., *The Complete Works*, 10 vols. (London: Ernest Benn. 1965) 9: 167; 12 July [1816]
- (11) *The Complete Works* 8: 85; 15 May 1811.
- (12) Maddox, p. 94.
- (13) According to Mary Shelley's journal, Shelley read the "Rêveries of Rousseau" in 1815. Frederick L. Jones, ed., *Mary Shelley's Journal*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1947) 1: 49.
- (14) The Preface to *The Revolt of Islam* in *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and corrected G. M. Mathews, 2nd ed. (Oxford:

OUP, 1970).

- (15) Quoted in Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln : Universty of Nebraska Press, 1989) 28.
- (16) Richard Holmes, *Shelley : The Pursuit* (London : Penguin, 1987) 404.
- (17) *The Pursuit*, p. 405.
- (18) *Shelley and His Audiences*, p. 4.
- (19) The preface to *Prometheus Unbound* in the Norton critical edition.
- (20) "Shelley, Keats and London Radical Writers", *The Romantics Reviewed : Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 2 vols. (New York : Garland, 1972) 1 : 146.
- (21) Shelley's latter letters show his discontent :

I am, speaking literally, infirm of purpose. I have great designs, and feeble hopes of ever accomplishing them. ... To be sure, the reception the public have given me might [go] far enough to damn any man's enthusiasm. (*Complete Works* 10 : 222 ; Nov. 1820)

My "Cenci" had been, I believe, a complete failure ... at least the silence of the book seller would say so ... With no strong personal reasons to interest me, my disappointment on public grounds has been excessive. (10 : 266 ; May 1821)

As to the Poem I send you, I fear it is worth little. Heaven knows what makes me persevere (after the severe reproof of public neglect) in writing verses ; and Heaven alone, whose will I execute so awkwardly, is responsible for my presumption. (10 : 285 ; July 1821)

I write nothing, and probably shall write no more. It offends me to see my name classed among those who have no name. If I cannot be something better, I had rather be nothing, and accursed cause to the downfall of which I dedicate what powers I may have had — flourishes like a cedar and covers England with its boughs (10 : 307 ; August 1821).

I try to be what I might have been, but am not successful[1]. (10 : 333 ; Oct. 1821)

Or who acted as midwife to this last of my orphans [Hellas], introducing it to oblivion, and me to my accustomed failure ? (10 : 370 ; April 1822)

- (22) "Julian and Maddalo" in Norton Critical Edition, pp. 112-13.

- (23) See "To Wordsworth" (1816) and "Peter Bell the Third" (1819).
- (24) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London ; Penguin, 1953) 479.