

English 249: English Literature and the French Revolution
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Shelley's Janus-Visaged Sublime:
 Creation, Destruction, and Stasis in "The Two Spirits—An Allegory,"
 "Ode to the West Wind," and "The Triumph of Life"



A Roman bust of the Janis Bifrons, from the Vatican¹

Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems, "The Two Spirits—An Allegory," "Ode to the West Wind," and "The Triumph of Life" present a "Janus-visaged"² spirit of the sublime, a spirit of energy, vigor, motion and action. The structure of the "Allegory," giving voice to warring spirits of destruction and redemption, masks what the spirits hold in common. That each spirit pulses with vitality — First Spirit's terrifying energy, Second Spirit's shimmering harmony — recasts the spirits of "Allegory" as two faces of one spirit, the sublime, rather than genuinely different forces. Subtly suggesting as much through the

¹ <<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/f/f4/Janus-Vatican.JPG/300px-Janus-Vatican.JPG>>.

² "Upon the chariot's beam / A Janus-visaged Shadow ..." ("The Triumph of Life," lines 93-95).

imagery, meter and rhyme scheme of the “Allegory,” Shelley progresses in “Ode to the West Wind” to fuse the two spirits into one alarmingly energized power, both “Destroyer and Preserver” (14)³. Having re-oriented the epic struggle from one between sublime destruction and sublime creation to one between the sublime and its antithesis, Shelley can now illustrate that antithesis: a life without the sublime, neither terrifying nor redeeming. It would not even be life, but a walking death, Shelley suggests, employing ghoulish imagery in the “Ode” and especially in “The Triumph of Life,” whose “public way” where urbanites purposelessly march through their day morphs rapidly into the setting for a dance of death. The sublime horrors of this dance raise questions about the sublime that the “Allegory” and “Ode” do not raise. Yet the fact that such modern listlessness ushers the dance in re-affirms the idea that life without the sublime is hardly life at all. Shelley brings this theme from the epic to the human with his reflections on his own life in the “Ode,” and with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s exclamation, in “Triumph,” that “I / Am one of those who have created, even / If it be but a world of agony” (293-295).

Thus, Shelley suggests that though we may be tempted to fear perverse energy as benevolent energy’s opposite, it is but the latter’s other face. The two are of the same kind and, like Janus’ faces, inseparable. The opposite of both benevolent *and* perverse energy is the absence of energy. These two fundamental forces are in fact what we mean by life and death. Even a “destroyer,” or Rousseau’s “agony,” represents a life-force at work; these are not death, though they may cause death. In an update of the Biblical impetus to “choose life,”⁴ Shelley implores us to agree to and indeed revel in a life of the sublime, even its

³ All future numbers in parentheses refer to the corresponding line number or numbers in the poem being discussed.

⁴ Deut. 30:19. All Biblical references in this paper refer to the King James translation, at <www.biblegateway.com>.

work as a “destroyer” as well as a “preserver,” rather than accept the drudgery of the “public way” and the profound death its weak, plebeian impotence presents.

I. Creation and Destruction in “The Two Spirits—An Allegory”

Any discussion of the similarities between First Spirit and Second Spirit in “The Two Spirits—An Allegory” must begin with the differences between the spirits, for elucidating these differences is the poem’s purpose, or at least its most explicit one. The stanza headings of “First Spirit” and “Second Spirit,” followed by the voices of the spirits themselves, encourage the reader to hear the poem as a 32-line closet drama, the stanza headings like stage directions, as each spirit begins bellowing at the other the instant the other finishes bellowing at him. Shelley layers his poem atop Western culture’s tradition of a separation between day and night and moral symbolism in that distinction. The tradition begins with Hebrew Scripture’s creation story: “And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.”⁵

Shelley builds on this tradition, whose resonance in Western culture encourages the reader all the more to see the two spirits of night and day as “divided”: when First Spirit shout to Second Spirit, “A shadow tracks thy flight of fire” (3); when First Spirit explains, “Bright are the regions of the air,” but proclaims, as if cackling, that to this “bright” place, “Night is coming!” (5 and 8); when First Spirit prophesies, “The red swift clouds of the hurricane / Yon declining sun have overtaken” (21-22). (Red is of course not darkness, but, bearing a range of ominous associations, from bleeding to volcanoes to fiery explosions, it

⁵ Genesis 1:4-5.

is still an appropriate color to overtake the day and light represented by the “sun,” which already is “declining.”) Second Spirit’s vows to “make night day” forge the counterpart to First Spirit in this “allegory” of the separation between light and darkness (16). Second Spirit promises that even if it “should cross the shade of night,” it could “make night day” with “the lamp of love,” with “golden plumes,” and with a “flight” after which “the moon will smile with gentle light” and “meteors” — which scholars imagine to be shooting stars⁶ — “will linger” (10-16). All of these lush images of bright light complete the poem’s day-night dichotomy, while the words “love” and “gentle” link it directly to spirituality and morality.

Another reading of the poem might emphasize what First Spirit and Second Spirit have in common, rather than what drives them to battle. Nobody could doubt that the “Allegory” details two spirits in opposition, but another reading of the poem might reveal two spirits nevertheless of the same kind: the aesthetic grandeur and vitality of the sublime. In that sense, the vitality in the imagery, meter and rhyme of each spirit renders the poem not merely a battle of two spirits, but a view of two faces of the one spirit of the sublime. Consider First Spirit’s imagery: what is remarkable is that, although extraordinarily foreboding, full of destruction, First Spirit itself is far from an epitome of death. It froths with excitement. First Spirit’s first salvo establishes it firmly in this sublime mold:

*O Thou who plumed with strong desire
 Would float above the Earth—beware!
 A shadow tracks thy flight of fire—
 Night is coming!
 Bright are the regions of the air
 And when winds and beams []
 It were delight to wander there—*

⁶ See Footnote 2 on page 137 of the *Norton Shelley*.

Night is coming!
(1-8)

Here we have a “shadow” out to “track” — and, as the sinister connotation of “track” hints, and as “beware!” heralds, to destroy, literally to over-“shadow” — this mysterious “Thou,” characterized by “strong desire” and by the spiritual transcendence of “float[ing] above the earth.” One might be tempted to read First Spirit, then, as the opposite of desire and spiritual transcendence. But the desire to destroy a desire is in fact a desire of its own, and First Spirit too plans to inhabit “regions of the air.” Something about this destructive force holds energy and motion. “Night” is not merely the absence of day, but its own living force, a thing that “is coming!” The exclamation points potently (if a bit too easily) heighten the awe accompanying this motion and power that First Spirit possesses. Consider First Spirit’s response to Second Spirit:

*But if the whirlwinds of darkness waken
Hail and Lightning and stormy rain—
See, the bounds of the air are shaken,
 Night is coming.
The red swift clouds of the hurricane
Yon declining sun have overtaken,
The clash of the hail sweeps o’er the plain—
 Night is coming.
(17-24)*

Again First Spirit’s language overflows with nature’s primal, terrifying power: “whirlwinds,” “waken,” “stormy,” “shaken,” “swift,” “hurricane,” “overtaken,” “clash,” “sweeps.” In the contrarian “but,” followed by the sly suggestion of what might undo Second Spirit’s plans, you can almost hear First Spirit cackling. Shelley suggests that although First Spirit can cause death, it is far from dying; it is as alive with the darker aspect of sublimity as the benevolent Second Spirit is with the lighter.

The meter of First Spirit's speech augments the sense of kinetic vitality, as the reader comes to hear it in the poem's sound as well as understand it through the poem's diction. The strict iambic tetrameter creates the music of regular, rushing forward motion, like the beats of horse hooves in a hurtling chariot.⁷ Tetrameter is an unconventional choice. Iambic pentameter is generally considered English's default meter, from Shakespeare to Milton to Frost. Shelley himself uses it in many works, including *Prometheus Unbound*. Given that the ear of a reader of English would expect five beats per line, Shelley's four gives his verse an unexpectedly brusque pace that jolts the reader. One hears the sound of lines wildly shooting out, lines too energized to bother with the *pro forma* five beats, so full of uncontrollable energy, like hurricanes and whirlwinds, as to trip over themselves, skipping a line before finishing all five beats.⁸

The rhyme scheme works similarly to impart a fusion of energized motion and jarring surprises. If you consider lines 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 to be a poem of their own, the *ababab*⁹ rhyme scheme deploys these tools: in the second line, the vigor in the unexpected sound (b rather than a); and in the remaining four lines, the driving momentum of the repeated sound of a after b after a, like a left foot and a right foot marching. The latter effect's variation — neither always *a* nor always *b*, but one after the other — lends it freshness that keeps its repetition a strong pulse rather than a lulling singsong, as can happen with a less varied scheme like heroic couplets. These six lines, a bottom half of a

⁷ I will consider just such a chariot later in this paper, when I examine "The Triumph of Life."

⁸ The effect is the same as in the witches' speech in *Macbeth*, except Shakespeare goes one step further than Shelley by choosing not only tetrameter but *trochaic* tetrameter rather than iambic, not only contradicting convention but beginning each line with a stressed syllable's electric shock. Poe borrows Shakespeare's choice in his aurally masterful poem, "The Raven."

⁹ We can assume quite safely that whatever word Shelley, had he not passed away too soon, would have chosen to complete line 6 would have completed the now-partially intact rhyme scheme of *ababab*, to which the rest of the poem keeps as well.

Petrarchan sonnet, provide the perfect form for the line that most boldly establishes First Spirit's vital power — “Night is coming!” — to interrupt. This break in form jolts the reader again, calling attention to the line and lending it all the more energy. The punctuation marks, like cantillation marks, encourage the reader — again, potently, if too easily — to read with vigor, enhancing the aural motion, accompanying imagery of it.

Second Spirit's sublime sense of aesthetic transcendence and harmony reaching the level of grandeur mark it as different from First Spirit, a force of awe-inspiring creation against First Spirit's power of destruction. But the sublime quality of that sense in Second Spirit links Second Spirit to First Spirit and the sublime energy of that very destructive power. Thus are the two spirits different in type, but the same in kind. The feeling of the sublime can arise in many different ways. Second Spirit summons not the sublime terror of First Spirit, but sublime, aesthetically towering “love” (a word Second Spirit actually uses at line 11)—the sublime grandeur, the genuine aesthetic quality, and the energy the reader feels in the chance to trust Second Spirit that the world will survive, that he will succeed in his quest to “make night day” (16). Consider Second Spirit's responses to First Spirit:

*The deathless stars are bright above;
If I should cross the shade of night
Within my heart is the lamp of love
And that is day—
And the moon will smile with gentle light
On my golden plumes where'er they move;
The meteors will linger around my flight
And make night day.
(9-16)*

Everything about Second Spirit's imagery is full of beauty on awe-inspiring heights. The image of the moon smiling on Second Spirit's “golden plumes,” as well as the shooting stars of “meteors” deeming them worth “linger[ing] around,” creates a cosmic

scale, placing on it a sense of redemption. Celestial bodies like the moon and shooting stars are the deities of the ad-hoc religion of Romanticism's love of nature. These images of celestial bodies' approval, then, compose Shelley's equivalent of the Biblical moment, "And God saw the light, that it was good." Like the word "love," as I mentioned before, they lend a moral character to the light of the passage. "The two lines that interrupt the stanza's form ("And that is day," and "And make night day") differ, as was not the case with First Spirit, whose interrupting lines were identical ("Night is coming!"). The difference is significant. The change from the doubt of, "If I should... / And that is day," to the certainty of, "And make night day," augments the spirit of deep peace. The meter and rhyme are the same as First Spirit's, lending Second Spirit the same sense of raw, hurtling motion and energy.

Spirits First and Second share not only meter and rhyme, but setting and matter, reinforcing that the two spirits are of the same kind. Second Spirit does not seek to wipe out First Spirit. He needs not *replace* night with day. He seeks only to "make" night day. If one can be turned into the other, they cannot possibly be that different. The specific image of the "meteors" suggests that shooting stars are all Second Spirit needs to change night into day. Just so, in Second Spirit's second stanza, Second Spirit agrees to "sail on the flood of the tempest dark," rather than seek to obliterate this "flood," this "night," for "the calm within and light around" can "make night day" (26-28). All Second Spirit needs to change "the gloom... deep and stark" into "day" is "My moonlike flight" (26-31). Night and day, then, are not different in kind. They are of one kind — the sublime — and with one set of features or another, with the "golden plumes" or "swift clouds of the hurricane,"

this one kind has the potential to become either of its two types: either First Spirit or Second Spirit; either creation or destruction.

A poem called “The Two Spirits—An Allegory,” in which each spirit vows to pervade the universe — spirits of no one place’s “night” and “day” but the conditions themselves — invites the reader to imagine what the world would be like if characterized by one spirit or the other. Second Spirit wins the cosmic battle, as Shelley positions it second, allowing First Spirit time to wreak sublime chaos before Second Spirit seizes the world’s reins and light the “lamp of love.” But regardless of which spirit succeeded, the world would be characterized by sublime feeling and power — the one spirit in the war of “The Two Spirits” that cannot lose.

II. Creation, Destruction and Stasis in “Ode to the West Wind”

Given that these dual forces of creation and destruction battle in an epic contest, yet on a deeper level are of the same kind, one wonders if this kind — the sublime life-force, comprising both Spirits First and Second — faces a cosmic foe of its own, the opposite of *both* creation *and* destruction. We do not meet this foe in “The Two Spirits—An Allegory.” The poem never describes what the union of Spirits First and Second would look like, so neither can it illustrate what that united force might oppose. Revelations of both lie in a poem Shelley wrote about a year after the “Allegory”: his “Ode to the West Wind.”¹⁰ To dive into Section I of the “Ode” after the “Allegory” — which, for all the energy the spirits hold in common, details at least in structure, and in core ways in

¹⁰ The *Norton Shelley’s* editors “tentatively” estimate that Shelley wrote “The Two Spirits—An Allegory” “between October 1818 and February 1819” (*Norton Shelley*, p. 137). They date “Ode to the West Wind” at “October 20-25, 1819” (*Norton Shelley*, p. 297).

meaning, destruction against creation — is to perceive the entire universe ripped inside-out. In the West Wind, the two spirits are one.

With the first words, “O wild West Wind,” we are again in the land of the sublime (1), not only in the apostrophic “O,” or the word “wild” (repeated again at line 13), but the particular wind of the West. Shelley selects the wind whose origin would have stood, to readers in 1819, for the untamed, fierce, raw nature of the American continents’ unsettled badlands, and that flows toward the East, as did the Israelites to the Promised Land and the Shepherds to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, and as would modern pilgrims of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We begin in the flavor of the sublime particular to Second Spirit. “Thou breath of Autumn’s being,” the poem’s speaker exclaims, suggesting a life-force (“breath”) that supports existence (“being”), a benevolent act tantamount to creation itself (1). But consider how the speaker proceeds:

*Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,*

*Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed*

*The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave...*

(2-8)

Now we are once more immersed in First Spirit’s sublime terror. The “unseen presence” of the “enchanter,” presents a sinister figure in the vein of First Spirit’s “shadow.” That “shadow” possessed the awesome power to “track,” to be “coming,” to have “shaken” and “overtaken”; just so, the West Wind “drive[s]” and “chariotest[s],” orchestrating a fury of motion, which Shelley illustrates by summoning color after color, creating the sensation that one color after another is flying before one’s eyes (“Yellow, and

black, and pale, and hectic red”). Shelley augments this terror with his strong imagery of the underworld, turning the West Wind’s realm into a sort of *danse macabre*. The leaves are “dead,” “like ghosts” and “fleeing,” “pestilence-stricken” and — borrowing a word from the Bible’s lexicon — “multitudes.” As if this scene were not hellish enough, they too are bound for a “dark wintry bed... like a corpse within its grave.” It is all under the aegis of the Lord of this Underworld, the “enchanter”: the West Wind. Scholars have noted as well that in comparing the dead to leaves, Shelley borrows an image whose rich lineage through Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton positions the scene of the West Wind as the latest “journey to the underworld” in a rich history of such.¹¹

Shelley returns the Wind, however, to the Second Spirit’s realm of sweet creation and calm, life-giving repair, showing the reader what rites it performs in the Spring:

*...until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:
(8-12)*

We are now a world apart from the previous stanzas’ dance of death. “Flocks” summons both pastoral simplicity and peaceful trust — as perfect as a flock’s before its master — in the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition rich in shepherds, from Abel to Moses to David to Jesus, who of course is “the lamb of God” as well. “Clarion” dips too into Judeo-Christian imagery of breathing new life into the dead. But Shelley transposes the “clarion” into the Romantic religion of nature. This “clarion” awakens the world not to the Last Judgment but to “sweet buds... with living hues and odours plain and hill.” Even the

¹¹ See footnote 2 on p. 298 of the *Norton Shelley*.

state before this redemption is no gruesome fate, but “the dreaming Earth.” First Spirit is a Hegelian thesis, Second Spirit the antithesis. In the West Wind, we find synthesis: “Wild Spirit... Destroyer and Preserver” (13-14).

More significant than the fact that the West Wind can *both* destroy *and* preserve is the fact that even its destruction holds *in it* a quality of preservation, just as First Spirit represented too a kind of life-force in the sublime energy that destruction demands and represents. The leaves’ dance of death is fearsome. Consider also, though, that Christian scripture proclaims, “The dead shall be raised,”¹² which is too one of Judaism’s Thirteen Principles of Faith.¹³ To oversee the “driv[ing]” of the dead is ominous, yet were it not for the West Wind driving these “leaves dead,” they would not be moving at all. The West Wind’s force is terrifying in its grandeur, and the leaves turn “driven” and “fleeing” and “hectic” at its whim, but at least the leaves have energy and motion now once again. In just the first three stanzas of the “Ode,” first the reader sees the West Wind as a force that gives life; then he encounters it as a force that orchestrates death; finally, he sees that in orchestrating death, there is at least orchestration, bearing more vitality than no orchestration at all.

The synthesis in the West Wind of both First and Second Spirit suggests an image for the sublime’s opposite, for a world that indeed had no orchestration of all, devoid of any energy and vitality. Wind has deep resonance in Western culture as a symbol of life. It is always in motion. The word “wind” is not far in meaning from spirit, which in turn is linked to soul. In Hebrew, for instance, “wind” and “spirit” are in fact the same word,

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:52.

¹³ “The Belief in the Resurrection of the Dead,” *The Thirteen Principles of Faith of Moshe ben Maimon*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/rambam13.html>>.

□□□ , *ruach*. Consider William Wordsworth's lines in the opening of his epic poem, *The Prelude*:

*O there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
A visitant that while it fans my cheek
Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
From the green fields, and from yon azure sky...*

*For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A correspondent breeze...¹⁴*

The absence of wind is mere still air: the emptiest void we know. It is robbed of vitality, without creation or even destruction. It is stasis. Perhaps nothing is so without energy in this condition as a dead leaf, small, as thin as a thing can be, after a time colorless, always motionless. When the reader considers a life without wind, he realizes that Shelley's tale of the West Wind's "breath" and "spirit" is not merely telling a story, but describing a power to be battled for. To be blown through life's wind once more, free from stasis' helplessness to move, feel or act, is at stake.

Shelley hints at this death in Section IV of the "Ode." The speaker, one presumes, is mired in it, so earnestly does he yearn for the Wind to redeem him. Here, the previous three stanzas' epic scale shrinks to the hauntingly personal. Shelley's speaker describes a childhood of joyful energy, by implication mourning too his adult life stripped of vitality. He explains:

*If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear...
... and share*

*The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O Uncontroulable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be*

¹⁴ <<http://64.233.161.104/search?q=cache:BHGQbX7q-vUJ:www.gutenberg.org/files/12383/12383-8.txt+%22o+there+is+blessing%22&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=8&client=safari>>.

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven...

*... in prayer in my sore need.
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!*

*A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.
(43, 44-49, 52-56)*

In this way, the speaker describes his transformation, indeed degeneration, from child into adult as a morphing from the sublime to the plebian. The reader infers, beginning with, “If I were a dead leaf,” that the speaker is indeed a dead leaf (the “If I were,” to begin this apostrophic plea, functions as a poetic version of that self-parodying way to begin asking a friend for advice: “If I were having a problem with my girlfriend... not that I am; let’s just say if I were...”). What the West Wind does with dead leaves is no secret. He “drive[s]” them and “chariotest[s]” them. He is an “enchanter,” his leaves like “ghosts.” For the speaker to have the West Wind “bear” him would not be all cheerful “comrade[ship]” and peacefully soaring “wanderings.” The speaker knows it. He reveals as much awe as joy in his yearning for “the impulse of thy strength,” and the epithet, “O Uncontrollable!” — two descriptions that epitomize the fused creative and destructive powers of the sublime, whose terrible aesthetic matters most, and with whom whether creation or destruction is at hand is almost beside the point. Just so, the speaker is willing, indeed desperate, for “the impulse of thy strength.” Even the most terrifying energies of destruction are energies.

True death lies not there, but in the life — the walking death, rather --- of an adult adrift amidst modernity. The “heavy weight of hours” refers to the spiritual “chain[s]” of having lived so many hours, years, and experiences that one can never return to the psychological Eden of childhood’s pure divinity. It also refers, perhaps more significantly,

to being bound by a schedule of hours, which restricts one's will like "chain[s]," and toward whose artificial impositions, like an Israelite before a man-made idol, we have "bowed" against our will. "Heavy weight" could also be literal (though in so spiritually transcendent a poem it almost takes a figurative meaning by default) and refer to a watch. One takes on a watch as a grownup, when at last one needs it, and it literally weighs one down. It even resembles a handcuff, if not quite "chain[s]." In modern society, this spiritual void is the new cross to bear, the new ultimate sacrifice, as the speaker "bleed[s]" upon the "thorns of life." Of life, not a crown; here we see a Passion expanded beyond one prophet's purview to all humans and the human condition. This entropic spiritual decay is what leads the speaker to yearn, "If even / I were as in my boyhood," and to give his "prayer," "Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!" as in that time when the sublime touched his life. It leads him to plea to the West Wind to restore him, to raise him from his death of modern, adult spiritual impotency, as the Wind raised the dead leaves and as God, Scripture promises, will raise the dead:

*Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies*

*Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!*

*Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,*

*Scatter, as from an unextinguished heart
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth*

*The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*

(57-70)

The plea is full of the sublime, again the blend of Spirits First and Second, of “Spirit fierce” and “a new birth!” — the desire for even pain, or pain and pleasure fused (“Sweet though in sadness”) rather than a life of no feeling at all. We saw before the ghoulishness of the “leaves dead / ...driven,” but the speaker begs, “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves,” rather than allowing his “leaves [that] are falling” merely to remain fallen. As the speaker mentions “my ... thoughts,” “my words,” and “the trumpet of a prophecy!” the reader comes to see that ideas, thoughts, words and poetry represent a kind of sublime wind all their own. So too does reveling in one’s individual self. There is a broader collective as well, the “mankind” of “my words among mankind!” but “mankind” is the setting here; the subject is “my words.” The self becomes a focal point of the sublime (“Make me thy lyre,” “Be thou me, impetuous one!”) Again the question is not what type of thoughts, or self, one has, but whether one has the spirit, the *ruach*, to feel “prophecy,” to be someone, as the speaker prays to the Wind he might.

This salvation from life as a “dead leaf,” this “lift[ing]” up, this transcendence through the sublime power of nature, prophecy and identity — this is the significance of the contest, this is what is on the line in the contest, between the West Wind, “Destroyer and Preserver” (emphasis added), and its cosmic foe of energy-bereft blandness. By now Shelley has moved far beyond the borders of “The Two Spirits—An Allegory.” If the broader, Romantic cosmic battle of “Ode to the West Wind” had been written in the form of the “Allegory,” the spirit of destruction would be the “heavy weight of hours” that stunts the speaker’s own vitality. The spirit of redemption would be that very vitality, the kind of both First and Second Spirit, of both “Destroyer and Preserver.”

III. Creation, Destruction and Stasis in “The Triumph of Life”

About two years after writing the “Ode,”¹⁵ Shelley began “The Triumph of Life,” a fragment of a poem he never was able to complete, what some scholars call his “final major effort.”¹⁶ Any work called “The Triumph of Life” leads one to wonder just what life is, and over what it must triumph. These questions raise in turn the same issue I have raised within “The Two Spirits—An Allegory” and “Ode to the West Wind”: how to define the struggle between life and death. Although this later work presents problems and complexities that the “Ode” and the “Allegory” less readily handle, “Triumph” too presents a vision of the dual faces, benevolent and destructive, of energy, in which even that latter face is far preferable to the impotence and confusion that is genuine death.

The first sequence of imagery in “Triumph” presents the benevolent face: the Second Spirit, or the West Wind in the Spring. Shelley begins the poem thus:

*Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory and of good, the Sun sprang forth
Rejoicing in his splendour, and the mask*

*Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth.
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.
All flowers in field or forest which unclose*

*Their trembling eyelids to the kiss of day,
Swinging their censers in the element,
With orient incense lit by the new ray...*

...Up to the smiling air...

¹⁵ The Norton Shelley's editors estimate that Shelley wrote “The Triumph of Life” between “May and June 1822” (Norton Shelley, p. 481).

¹⁶ Norton Shelley, p. 481.

... *As the Sun their father rose...*

(1-12, 14, 18)

This gorgeous imagery is remarkable for its sense of sublime “glory and... good.” The scene’s energy begins with the motion in the very first word, “Swift,” continuing in the dazzling colors when the altars “flamed above crimson clouds” (arousing the sublime as well through strangeness — no ordinary vision features *crimson* clouds), and arising from the epic scale of the Sun, the Earth, mountains, altars, clouds, oceans, and forests. Like the “clarion” of “sweet buds” in the “Ode,” this opening stanza creates a religion of nature, layering the awe that the Judeo-Christian tradition would have held for Shelley’s readers upon nature’s raw majesty. Not only do we have “censers,” “incense” (“orient incense,” no less — again, the sublime of the foreign), a “*matin lay*” prayer, and “altars,” but what we have by them is a creation story without a God. A God would be unnecessary. Nature’s sublime beauty is holy enough. The Sun replaces God as the “father,” God’s traditional role in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Sun needs no God to direct him, as in Genesis (“And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day... And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth”¹⁷). Rather, he simply acts, “hastening to his task... / Rejoicing in his splendour” (1, 3). The “mountain snows” are “smokeless altars” (5). They need no religious sacrifice to make them holy. They are altars by themselves, reveling in their own “flam[ing]” (6), testaments to nature’s sublime aesthetic grandeur.

¹⁷ Genesis 1:16-17.

This opening sequence is notable too for its strong feeling of purpose. Every force does its job; everything has its role. This sense of supreme order is suggested by the vast number of things that are part of this operation (not just “flowers,” but “*all* flowers in field *or* forest” — emphasis added) and by the catalog of list form of the clauses, as if the events in a chain are being listed as they occur, as if meant to occur on a regular schedule (“The Sun sprang forth... and the mask of darkness fell...”). Thus the passage thus fuses the beauty of sublime energy with the elegance of order and the meaning of purpose.

However, this spirit of sublimely transcendent harmony and lush light devolves quickly into a state of ominous, plebian hopelessness — the best imagining yet of what the opposite of the sublime would look like — accompanied by ghoulish imagery that suggests that true death is just this state of modern purposelessness. “But I...” Shelley begins, interrupting the flow of the order of the Sun’s service and nature’s rite (20). (One half expects Shelley to continue, “ ... that am not made for sportive tricks ... Since I cannot prove a lover / I am determinèd to prove a villain ... “¹⁸) From here on, the poem takes a dramatically different tone. “And then a vision on my brain was rolled,” Shelley writes, continuing: “Methought I sate beside a public way... that path where flowers never grew” (43, 65). For the first time in these three poems, Shelley has taken us to a setting that is neither part of nature, as with the West Wind and its leaves, nor amidst the metaphysical, as with the Spirits of the “Allegory.” (The “public way” is metaphysical to the extent that it exists only within Shelley’s “Vision,” but *within* the vision, it is a concrete, literal place.) In the “Ode,” the reader meets a man who begged to be “lift[ed]” — he is listless, the reader imagines (53); who pleads, “If even / I were as in my boyhood, and could be / The

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I.i.14, 28, 30 <<http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/richardiii/richardiii.1.1.html>>.

comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven...” — in his adulthood, he cannot find that sense of camaraderie or independent spirit, the reader infers (47-49). Now for the first time in the urban streets of “Triumph” we are in a setting where organized adulthood happens, and we are in position to see what this life, the antithesis of “boyhood” and “wanderings over Heaven,” is like. Shelley writes:

Me thought 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)

Two things are remarkable about this scene: its lack of the sublime, and its imagery of death that suggests such a life to be the truest death. Regarding the sublime, to say that *the scene* is without the sublime is not quite right. The “million leaves,” the “evening gleam,” the “great stream,” the “hastening” — Shelley evokes even within a “public way” an epic scale and pace, a literary counterpart to Wagnerian grandeur or Phil Spector’s “wall of sound,” that is nothing if not sublime. Rather, *the people in the scene* are without the sublime. They of course are not reading the rich language of “The Triumph of Life.” They are living the lives that Shelley describes, lives “where flowers” — symbolizing the un-“productive” yet beautiful, the sublime energy of even the smallest act of growth — “never grew.” The “Ode” linked the wind’s presence to the soul’s existence; these people

never “felt the breeze which from the forest told / Of grassy paths” — the opposite of this “public way” (69-70).

These lives include no individual identity. Whereas in the “Ode,” what will save the speaker if nothing else can is “my words among mankind” (67), in “Triumph” these people are only among mankind: they have no words of their own. Shelley never gives these people voice (Rousseau being the exception, but of course so towering a historical figure is hardly just another in the multitude). As he neither gives them any distinguishing, unique actions — “*all* hastening onward,” “a *great stream* / Of people” (emphases added); whatever is being done, *all* are doing it — or thoughts — we have one thing these people do *not* know (“whither he went, or whence he came, or why / He made one off the multitude”) but nothing that anyone *does* know — even if these people could speak, what would they have to say?

To be but part of the crowd, to let yourself go and lose yourself to it, is in some ways not to be at all. Literally and physically, the pedestrians have all the motion and force they need to reach the sublime heights of the First Spirit, “hastening onward” in a “great stream.” But figuratively and spiritually, they are bereft of vigor entirely. All the energy lies in the crowd. No individual can claim any of it; none can claim, then, really to be living. Each looks around and see the others of the “great stream / Of people,” of “the multitude,” of the “All,” “amid the crowd”; he is just like these other people, and he does not know or feel himself, and maybe that means — we have the unraveling of Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” at the hands of the forces of Dilbert and Bartleby and their removal of said I — there is not even a self to know or feel. One can hardly imagine a setting better than the grossly common “public way” for this scene of spiritual vapidness, the

antithesis of the energized individualism of the speaker of the “Ode,” of the West Wind itself and indeed Spirits First and Second. (One thinks of another great use in poetry of the word “public” to evoke this same fusion of the greasy and the bleak: Emily Dickinson’s famous verse, “How dreary—to be—Somebody! / How public—like a Frog— / To tell one’s name—the livelong June— / To an admiring Bog!”¹⁹)

With all of this tragic blandness the one saving grace the urbanites of the “public way” might glean is an individual purpose in life. Purpose demands energy for its execution. Knowing one has a purpose stirs energy within one. Purpose, then, in a spiritual mutual feedback cycle, both depends upon and spawns the sublime. First Spirit is intent on “overtak[ing] the sun”; Second Spirit jockeys to “cross the shade of night” with “the lamp of love”; the world needs the West Wind to be the “breath of Autumn’s being.” These three have different purposes, even divergent ones, but what they all have in common is that they do have a purpose. Purpose is not only sublime; it is individual. In the question, “What am I?” the “what” is so intangible and complex that it is almost impossible to define in any terms other than, “Why am I?” The reason one is put here, or the reason one chooses to make of one’s life, defines one perhaps more than anything else. In both these ways, purpose, sublime and individual, gives life.

But purpose is the very thing the denizens of the “public way” most lack. They have no place to go to (“none seemed to know / Whither he went ...”) and no place to come from (“... or whence he came ...”). That literal image — “hastening onward” without someplace to go to, like a home, family, friends, or a job that inspires passion — already is heartbreaking; but, worse, the lack of destination and place of origin morph into

¹⁹ Emily Dickinson, #288 <<http://www.bu.edu/favoritepoem/poems/dickinson/nobody.html>>.

symbols for a lack of goal and history (the two things that could tell these people the third thing they “seemed” not “to know”: “why / He made one of the multitude”). These people do have jobs, which are “serious,” but the jobs are ultimately meaningless — “serious folly” — and merely distract from the realm of the sublime where purpose ought to lie (73). Perhaps the saddest part is that “none *seemed* to know” (emphasis added). If “none knew” his purpose, we would have a bold, certain case for nihilism — a societal counterpart to First Spirit. Of course if “all knew” their purpose, we would have a human parallel to the aesthetic harmony of Second Spirit, or in “Triumph” to the “swift... sun” and the “smokeless altars,” each in its place. But “none *seemed* to know.” Ah, the nonchalance of the doubt — when life itself is at stake! One imagines each person saying, “Maybe I know; maybe I don’t; well, I don’t seem to,” as if the subject were which celebrity will host the pre-Oscar red carpet walk on TV this year. The people live neither with purpose, nor without, not with a definite opinion about the matter, and, as want of a definite opinion reveals, no real care or interest in the question. This lack of energy, vitality and engagement — that of purposelessness, and most of all that of indifference to purposelessness — is the reader’s deepest and most startling view yet into the antithesis of the sublime, of the West Wind and of both First and Second Spirit, and the boyhood of the speaker who in the “Ode” longs again for vigor amidst the scene’s modern impotence.

That condition is as far as one can fall from genuine human living, Shelley suggests by filling the scene with imagery of death. The supremely ghoulish, terrifyingly wheeling *danse macabre* Shelley presents in “Triumph” makes Part I of the “Ode” look like Robert Frost’s “Gathering Leaves.”²⁰ The “summer dust” summons the Bible’s most profound

²⁰ <<http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/201/>>.

symbol of humanity's low origins, cosmic futility and inescapable mortality. In Genesis, God "formed man of the dust of the ground."²¹ God, enraged after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, later uses this fact to humiliate Adam: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."²² (Shelley later adds that these people "to the dust whence they arose / Sink..." (173-174)). Shelley moves from the Judeo-Christian to the classical with the "great stream" of souls, recreating what Odysseus, Aeneas and Dante all see when they visit the underworld. What is particularly frightening here is that while Odysseus, Aeneas and Dante view this horror when they reach the realm of the dead, Shelley is not actually in the underworld. The "public way" with its spiritually eviscerated passersby resembles it entirely.²³ Shelley continues the trope of the underworld with the image of the pedestrians taking "steps toward the tomb / ...On the trodden worms," (56-57), comparing them to "the million leaves of summer's bier," just as Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton compared the dead to leaves.²⁴ In Shelley's roll call, all are present — "Old age and youth, manhood and infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear" — just as death does not always take only the old (52-53). Most explicitly: "Others mournfully within the gloom / Of their own shadow walked, and called it death ... " (58-59). Through rich symbolism and cultural reference painting the passersby of the "public way" as dead souls, Shelley suggests that in a profound way, they are already dead.

²¹ Genesis 2:7.

²² Genesis 3:19.

²³ T.S. Eliot owes a heavy debt to Shelley and this sequence in "Triumph" for the passage in *The Waste Land* in which Eliot writes, "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet" (*The Waste Land*, lines 60-65; <<http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html>>). Eliot also mirrors Shelley's borrowing of the Biblical image of dust when Eliot writes, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (*The Waste Land*, line 30).

²⁴ See footnote 2 on p. 298 of the *Norton Shelley*.

The most menacing figure of the underworld in the scene, however, is yet to come:

*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
(86-90)*

No *danse macabre* would be complete without the Grim Reaper himself. Here, he enters complete with “dusky hood” and “double cape,” even the “shadow of a tomb.” The “chariot” of death presents a complex moment in the poem, however, because of the celebration it meets (“The million, with fierce song and maniac dance / Raging around; such seemed the jubilee / As when to greet some conqueror’s advance”) (110-113). Now we are back in the territory of the sublime. The sublime is nothing if not the sensory and emotional overload of “fierce song,” “maniac dance” and “raging.” Yet this sequence is not meant to be so aesthetically grand as to distract from any moral content. The dance is compared to “some conqueror’s advance,” e.g. “Imperial Rome... when Freedom left those who upon the free / Had bound a yoke...” — perhaps the worst curse Shelley, a true champion of liberty (see his poem, “To Wordsworth,” in which he bemoans that the man has left the cause), can deliver (113, 115-116). The celebration is “obscene” (137) and “savage” (142) and “sad” (176). Shelley does not beg for it to “lift” him, as he does in “Ode to the West Wind,” even though it too is a “destroyer.” Instead he wails:

*Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
Half to myself I said, “and what is this?
... & why” —

I would have added—is all here amiss?”
(176-180)*

This change is not an “inconsistency” to be swept under the carpet. It is a nuance to be analyzed, and admired. First Spirit, even at its most vicious, always manages to excite the reader, like a supernatural Richard III. The West Wind, even at its most terrifying, is a figure of vitality to be revered. But “Triumph” is not afraid to raise questions, or feel disillusioned, “to the heart,” about the notion that the sublime in its aesthetic glory can do no wrong. The writing is as stirring, as powerful, as luxuriously energized and spilling with vitality, as all of Shelley’s; but morally, something is indeed “amiss” here — “all,” in fact, is “amiss.” Here is Shelley’s moment of “Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?”²⁵ or, in the *Aeneid*:

*Why was Juno outraged?
What could wound the Queen of the Gods with all her power?
Why did she force a man, so famous for his devotion,
to brave such rounds of hardship, bear such trials?
Can such rage inflame the immortals’ hearts?*²⁶

However, once one reconciles oneself with the fact that the chariot of death is truly malevolent, despite being sublime, this “amiss” state further indicts the urban listlessness and impotent confusion of the “public way” as a way of life tantamount to death. It is, after all, these very urbanites who cheer the chariot’s arrival.²⁷ Their purposelessness leaves them susceptible to doing so, as they are but ciphers; none knows principles or spiritual content — or, knowing them, more damning yet, one imagines “none seemed to know” such — to make him *someone*, to allow him to resist the crowd, to hold him back from this

²⁵ <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~lillsie/McCarthyism/downfall.html>>.

²⁶ Virgil, the *Aeneid*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), Book I, Lines 9-13.

²⁷ For our time, one might imagine suit-clad commuters thronged at a subway platform, only to see the chariot of death arrive instead, the “Shape” with the “double cape” calling out the stations, as the commuters lunge and dance, shouting. It is in fact not so hard to imagine. Commuters are silent as a group. Could they not rage as a group? Perhaps the scene could figure in a particularly socially conscious punk rock music video, or a lesser-known Bob Dylan song from the Reagan era.

danse macabre. Appropriately, “All the four faces of that charioteer / Had their eyes banded ...” (99-100). All the magic in the world, to boast four faces; yet the Grim Reaper, blindfolded, cannot see — neither physically nor spiritually, for his “banded eyes” cannot “pierce the sphere / Of all that is, has been, or will be done”) (103-104). His state of both literal and figurative blindness matches that of the hapless passersby, “hastening onward” yet without direction or meaning. As if a comment on them too, Shelley concludes, regarding the blind driver, “little profit” — the wry understatement is devastating” — “brings / Speed in the van and blindness in the rear...” (100-101). What brings the Grim Reaper to one’s life is not the time of literal, metabolic death. It is the moment when one stops feeling, when one stops knowing, when one stops being someone — losing all sublime vitality, morphing into just another dead “leaf,” “amid the crowd.”

Amid this morbid tumult appears the ghost of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, just as the shade of Tiresias appears to Odysseus in the underworld, and as Virgil does to Dante. Like Shelley in Part IV of the “Ode,” Rousseau takes the idea that only in the sublime can one truly live, for all else is but “summer dust,” and brings it from the epic level down to the realm of human historical past, and even to how we ought to understand our present and future. Rousseau tries twice to define life’s meaning, but he cannot: the first time, because he is a poor old man and loses his thought (“A voice answered... ‘Life...’ I turned and knew / ... one of that deluded crew... / Then like one who with the weight / Of his own words is staggered, wearily / He paused...” (180, 184, 196-198)), the second time, because when Shelley passed away, he left the poem unfinished (the poem ends, “Then, what is life? I said... the cripple... / ...Answered, “Happy those for whom the fold / Of” (544, 547-548)). Rousseau does, however, make this proclamation: “I / Am one of those who

have created, even / If it be but a world of agony” (293-295). The guilt springs from his awareness that his philosophy helped spawn the French Revolution, at whose bloodiest moments leaders quarreled over who had the right to claim Rousseau’s mantle (“And so my words were seeds of misery— / Even as the deeds of others” (280-281)). The *danse macabre*’s fusion of mass celebration and ghoulish rites evokes the new collective life, and collective killings, of the *sans-culottes* and *le Peuple*. The scene evokes the Reign of Terror for Rousseau as much as for the reader. Rousseau seeks in his defense to contrast himself with a series of classical emperors and medieval Popes, whose “power was given / But to destroy” (292-293). These rulers, whom Shelley deems tyrannical, are linked to the urban pedestrians earlier in the poem, who met the chariot of death “As when to greet some conqueror’s advance / Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea” (112-113). It is a sublime thing, and thus a life-affirming thing, to revel in ultimate liberty — to “be the comrade of... wanderings over Heaven,” as Shelley writes in the “Ode” (48-49) — so it feels right that tyranny is on the side of spiritual death in this dichotomy.

One might wonder about how “to destroy” could in Rousseau’s mind be on the opposite side of “those who have created,” when the sublime, as I have argued, unites the two, as one “Wild Spirit... Destroyer and Preserver,” worthy of worship. There are two answers. First, this complexity reveals in fact a more mature, nuanced examination of what destruction really entails — just as the chariot of death reveals a more complicated, franker understanding of what the sublime can do. But secondly, and much more significantly, Rousseau is saying about grand creation — which as we see in *Second Spirit* is a significant part of the sublime — what “The Two Spirits—An Allegory” and “Ode to the West Wind” reveal about the sublime in general. The idea is that a spirit of life-giving

energy is not inherently good. Nor is a malevolent force necessarily without life, even if it causes death, or in this case, “a world of agony.” Rather, a spirit of energy is not moral or immoral but *amoral*, a sheer force spilling over with its own vitality. It has the potential to turn either moral or immoral, toweringly magnanimous or terrifyingly perverse. The latter is not the opposite of the former; it is but its other, inseparable face. It too is one of creation’s forms. Certainly, it is preferable to neither face at all of the spirit of creation (or of the sublime more generally — a significant part, even with “agony,” of what we understand life to be.

What would a world without creation, without the sublime, look like? The “public way” offers one example, but Rousseau provides another, less expected one: the traditional image of paradise:

“In the April prime

*... With kindling green, touched by the azure clime
Of the young year, I found myself asleep
Under a mountain...*

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

*Bent the soft grass and kept for ever weet
The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove
With sound...*

308, 310-312, 314-317

We have the ideal colors for paradise (“green,” “azure”), the perfect textures for paradise (“gentle,” “soft,”) an ideal time for paradise (“the young year,” “the April prime”), and the right senses for paradise (“sweet,” “clear air,” “sound”). One might even surmise this to be

Rousseau's beloved state of nature, in which "man is born free" before "everywhere he is in chains."²⁸ But the kind of sound heard changes the scene from ideal to deeply sinister:

*"With sound which all who hear must needs forget
All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love,
Which they had known...
A sleeping mother there would dream not of*

The only child who died upon her breast..."
318-322

Suddenly this paradise has become alarmingly, fundamentally different from the life we know. First: Forgetting "all pleasure" is quite a high price to pay for forgetting "all pain." That the two appear one after the other, connected by a coordinating conjunction, emphasis that the two are present or disappear together, inseparable. Moreover, even forgetting "all pain" is itself not necessarily an appealing option. Better that the mother's child not have died; but children do die, and the image of a mother whose child died but who is so hypnotized by paradise that she cannot even give the matter thought does not sound like paradise: it sounds like a fiendish, ghoulish dystopia. But finally and most significantly, Rousseau presents paradise as hypnosis, paradise as literally living "asleep" (this state of life being the one closest to death, except perhaps for unconsciousness, that we know). In the vanishing of feelings and feelings' energy, this supposed paradise presents in fact a kind of death. One must accept painful feelings to enjoy the sweet feelings that give life; but moreover, even painful feelings give life — just as even First Spirit is sublime, not only Second Spirit. Feelings of all kinds define you as a self, for no one has your exact feelings. They provide the spiritual power that turns existence into *living*, more than just a plain series of biological processes. In that sense, this paradise, far from being an exulted

²⁸ <<http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/UnColl/PMG/PMGetal/THH-RB.html>>.

life, becomes a form of death, the opposite of the grand vision of life Shelley presents in the “Ode” of sublime life (“The tumult of thy mighty harmonies... Sweet though in sadness” (59, 61)). The paradise of which Rousseau tells is far more lush than the “public way,” but it just as drab, for want of energy, vitality and soul. Indeed, just as the public way’s mass purposeless lulled its denizens into preparedness for a *danse macabre*, so too, this “paradise” and its eerie hypnosis leaves one without the energy to resist the chariot of death, which, as Rousseau relates to Shelley, made its original appearance in this mystical realm (“The new vision, and its cold bright car, / With savage music, stunning music, crost / The forest, and as if from some dread war / Triumphantly returning ... (434-437).

IV. Conclusion

Shelley’s vision of the sublime comes with great significance, both in how to understand history and politics and in how to understand the world we have been given. Given that a political philosopher like Rousseau plays the role for the fictionalized Shelley of “Triumph” that a poet like Virgil played for Dante and a seer like Tiresias played for Odysseus, one would be remiss if one considered no political implications. The notion that it is better to create, “even if it be but a world of agony,” than to act destructively suggests that in society, one ought to spend one’s energy trying to create, to improve, to change, to redeem, even if its results be “but a world of agony,” for the sake of the good that may come, and for the sake of the vitality that lies even in the “agony” that comes otherwise, rather than simply to glide along in society, disengaged and passive. This point of view — fittingly, as in “Triumph,” Rousseau gives it voice — would legitimize the French Revolution, as an experiment that, though gone wrong, deserves our blessing for replacing

a corrupt monarchy with the ideals of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” ideals we still strive to achieve. Meanwhile, the speed with which the collective modern drudgery of “Triumph” devolves into a dance of death issues a stern warning against the dangers of mass culture. In the aftermath of a political movement whose catastrophes frequently came when the mob was acting as such and individuals gave themselves up to it, Shelley offers an “Ode” that shows the way to sublime individualism — whose glory later writers, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, would take up as well — and a *danse macabre*, in “Triumph,” that illustrates the dangers of not following that path of the energy in independence.

But Shelley ultimately is not a mere policymaker. To imagine as much is to produce a crude, coarse and incomplete understanding of the meaning his poems offer. A poem called “The Triumph of Life” invites the reader to wonder how to define “life,” and how too to define death, or whatever it is over which “life” must “triumph.” “The Two Spirits—An Allegory,” “Ode to the West Wind” and “The Triumph of Life” raise profound questions about our understandings of these phenomena so central to the human condition.

The words “death” and “life” have several, divergent meanings. “Death” can be a metonym for forces that cause death, powers of destruction, a force like First Spirit that “tracks” and “overtake[s]” and “shake[s].” When we imagine forces of death in Western culture, we are most likely imagining figures in this vein: the Grim Reaper, Satan, the Anti-Christ, or to a lesser extent, when one is a child, a particularly fearsome thunderstorm. Life, in contrast, is the force of creation, connection, love, joy, peace, repair and redemption. Here too the Judeo-Christian tradition encourages us to understand life in this sense: all of these attributes are the attributes we ascribe to God, and to the ideal parents. This traditional dichotomy of creation versus destruction, its roots deep in Judeo-

Christian culture, serves as a lens through which to view a poem like the “Allegory” as indeed a struggle of life overcoming death, a metaphysical recasting of the epic contest between the Anti-Christ (like First Spirit) and the returned Jesus (like Second Spirit).

A similar understanding of death is as the event that those destructive forces cause: the end of a person’s metabolic processes. Life is these processes, so long as they last. These definitions of the world are the most literal and ordinary. When we say a person “died,” this sad relinquishing of the power to act, to do, to feel, in favor of permanent physical stasis and rigor mortis, is what we have in mind.

But another conception of death suggests that these states of stasis and of motion have spiritual counterparts. It defines death as the absence of a life-force, of energy, of vitality, of movement, of spirit. The presence of all of these powers — even when used for destruction — is what we mean when we say “living,” or “being alive.” (These two terms are better than “life,” for this understanding of the world defines life as an active process, meriting a verb, not a thing to be possessed; a noun would not do.) Such a notion reveals that it is in fact possible to be literally alive — to retain the physical capabilities to move and act — yet in a profound sense to be dead already. One might live a life “chained” by “a heavy weight of hours,” like the speaker of “Ode to the West Wind,” or condemned to spend one’s days “hastening onward” in a “public way,” without direction, never to know “why / [One] made part of the multitude,” as in the urban death-dancers of “The Triumph of Life.” Maybe one finds a supposed paradise, free of pain, but its price is a life stripped of pleasure, as in Rousseau’s vision within Shelley’s vision within the poem, “The Triumph of Life.” Perhaps one lives out an existence that the Second Spirit of “The Two

Spirits—An Allegory” never touches, and that First Spirit never touches either, a life that no sublime spirit ever touches at all.

The visceral energy of Shelley’s sublime verse, and the personal emptiness, or worse, cosmic horror that can unfold in that energy’s absence illustrates that a weak, frail, purposeless, spiritless existence like any of these would be every bit as tragic a death as a literal, physical passing from this world. Even a life including the most perverse forms of energy — even to be “driven” to a “hectic” flight by the West Wind in winter; even to struggle and perhaps from time to time be overtaken by First Spirit’s “red swift clouds of the hurricane” — is still a life of grappling, engaging, reveling, acting, *living*. It is far superior to no life at all. What is more, the lesson of Rousseau’s dystopian vision in “Triumph” is that there is not even a way to revel in sublime, benevolent grandeur without some measure of sublime, towering pain. The two are not opposites, the latter to be avoided and the former to be sought. They are the same kind’s opposing faces, as inseparable as the two faces of the Janus Bifrons, to be accepted, and indeed loved together, as *what life is*.

Shelley’s vision of the sublime commands the reader to go out and pursue a genuine life of the spirit, before it is too late, before “boyhood” has expired, or the “chain[s]” have fallen, or the dance of death has begun in the “public way.” Though illustrated so powerfully in Shelley’s verse, this ordinance of the soul is perhaps most potently and succinctly issued by Alfred Tennyson, in his poem, “Ulysses”:

*Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off...
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;*

*One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*²⁹

In Hebrew Scripture, God tells the Children of Israel in the desert, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live...”³⁰ Perhaps God had in mind the more traditional, Judeo-Christian directive to choose creation over destruction. Shelley updates this command for an increasingly modern, drably urban era, all too like the “public way” of “Triumph.” His poetry sets before the reader the sublime against the plebian, the energized against the weak, the active against the passive, the spiritual against the impotent, the “destroyer” *and* “preserver” against the un-blown, dead leaf. In this world we have been given, in which so often “none seem[s] to know / Whither he went,” Shelley orders the reader to choose the sublime, that both he and his seed may live.

²⁹ < <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/ulyssesext.html>>.

³⁰ Deuteronomy 30:19.