Shelley's Visionary Poetry:

An Analysis of Five Poems

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INTRODUCTION

As a second generation Romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley distinguished himself from his predecessors like Wordsworth and Coleridge by reintegrating myth into poetry. Myth as an integral ingredient to man's imagination provides the basis for Shelley's visionary work. *Prometheus Unbound*, though paramount among Shelley's mythic and visionary poems, is beyond the scope of this thesis. The poetry represented here, however, spans a decade of Shelley's life. Shelley was nineteen years old when he created his first visionary work in "Queen Mab." His repeated use of vision in poetry came to a climatic end in 1822 with his last unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life.* The poems examined in this thesis chronologically illustrate Shelley's developing vision as a chameleon of thought, feeling, darkness, and light.

One needs to distinguish between the terms "dream" and "vision" even though Shelley uses them interchangeably throughout his poetry. Dream as we commonly know it is an individualized occurrence which undoubtedly reflects a person's desires or fears. Vision, on the other hand, is something of greater magnitude, for, while, it may be experienced by one person, it is a more universal projection which reveals certain truths about man and his world. Shelley allows dream and vision to work together. For example, in *Queen Mab*, Ianthe experiences and elaborate dream in which she is presented with visions of the past, present, and future.

Her dream begins and ends as a personal benefit, but the visions revealed during the course of that dream are beneficial to all. Shelley's visions are commonly ideal in nature, filled with divine figures, rainbows, paradises, and even love between the poet and ideal being. But along with the tempting vision, a warning occurs which is a constant theme for Shelley.

He seeks to continually remind man of his condition of mortality in illustrating that to attempt to overstep mortality in pursuit of eternal vision, could be fatal.

A dream and even a trance, (as seen in *The Triumph of Life*), are the prerequisites to the visionary experience in Shelley's poetry. His visions are not intended to expound any dogmatic truths but to bare poetic feelings to the world and leave it open for interpretation. Since Shelley variably uses the terms dream and vision, it must be understood that vision is the expansive component of the dream which enlightens the dreamer as well as the reader.

I

QUEEN MAB

Despite Shelley's fundamental skepticism, his beliefs in the creative and visionary powers of the human are strong. Imagination enabled him to write poetry which idealistically expresses a need for man's redemption. *Queen Mab* is a philosophical poem divided into nine cantos of unrhymed verse. The poem is a sharp denouncement of statesmanship, monarchy, and priesthood, offset by a vision of the shape of things to come. Carl Grabo accuses Shelley of "raving" and goes on to insist that *Queen Mab* is an "unrestrained" piece of work, whereas later works are more "controlled" and therefore, more effective.[1] But we need to see that *Queen Mab* deals with metaphysical questions as they appear to the young Shelley, whom Carlos Baker refers to as "the radical young enthusiast." [2] Questions which pertain to life, death, time, and eternity are just a few of the subjects which his vision centers on. The poem incorporates multiple influences which would suggest that their ideology, intent, structure, and imagery are all founded from the most characteristic modes of eighteenth century thought, coupled with man's position and relation to the universe.

To understand the basis for Shelley's dream-vision passages in *Queen Mab* as well as in the rest of his poetry it is important to understand where and how at least part of his imaginative power took root. Shelley found varying degrees of significance in the theories of William Godwin, Baron Paul Henri d'Holbach, Thomas Taylor and John Frank Newtown.[3] A variety of elements drawn from the beliefs of these men is evident in Shelley's visionary attempt in Queen Mab.

In *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley*, Ross Woodman supplies the general idea behind the beliefs of the men who influenced the visionary Shelley. Godwin maintained a theory which he called "immaterialism." He asserted that through this theory man would use his rational ability to comprehend at least part of the universe, which in turn, would bring life into conformity with its will. Godwin saw the universe as being governed by a supreme sort of intelligence. The essence of Godwin's belief was established in the figure of *Queen Mab*, the first of Shelley's ideal women who embody pure intelligence, spirit, and beauty. Contrary to Godwin, d'Holbach believed that man is merely a mass of matter cast into a state of reality which also consists of matter, In such a state man has no free will and no soul distinct from his body; "therefore he must destroy the false gods of his imagination and substitute for them correct ideas of nature.

In one of *Queen Mab's* discourses on Necessity, Shelley offers his own understanding of d'Holbach's belief:

> Thou know'st not: all that the wide world contains
> Are but they passive instruments, and thou
> Regard'st them all with an impartial eye,
> Whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel,
> Because thou has not human sense,
> Because thou art not human mind. (VI.214-19)

Shelley therefore alters man's submission to d'Holbach's Necessity into an active acceptance. Taylor and Newton are responsible for the Orphic theory, which presents a vision of man as a divinity, imprisoned in flesh where man slowly attempts to free himself from the "restless wheel of life."[7] An example of such thought is demonstrated when Shelley makes the crucial

distinction between the body and soul in *Queen Mab*. Shelley viewed the soul as something "ever-changing," and the body as an "endless being," whereas he saw the body as a "useless and worn-out machine" that "rots, perishes and passes." (11.150-56)

Shelley was successful in representing each of these views in his work, and he clearly indicates his general plan to illustrate the allegorical adventure of his mind. Even so, the poem never unites the theories into one coherent vision. Owing to this failure many critics have labeled *Queen Mab* as a "juvenile" work. For example, Woodman plainly sees *Queen Mab* as "fragmentary" in its construction, and goes on to point out that Shelley "infuses d'Holbach's materialism with Godwin's immaterialism." He acknowledges that spirit with the Orphic doctrine of man's latent divinity and yearning to escape the limitations of the flesh." Not until later works was Shelley able to create the concrete and understandable vision that he originally intended.

Shelley's great claim in *Queen Mab* is that Necessity rules all. Shelley equates d'Holbach's Necessity with the Neo-Platonic world soul. In d'Hobach's system the mind is enslaved to "material automatism," where no voluntary action is possible. [9] Woodman states that "it is a mere folly to attack the injustices of human society if those injustices are dictated by a blind and fatalistic Necessity."[10] Shelley's interpretation of d'Holbach is poetically utilized when he asserts: "Spirit of nature! All-sufficing power, / Necessity! Thou mother of the world!" (11.197-98) He therefore saw the rebellion against the existing order of society as the result of a spiritual penetration into the universal world soul.

Once the didactic qualities of *Queen Mab* are overlooked, it becomes evident how Shelley put his metaphorical elements to work. As a reward for her earthly purity, Ianthe

transcends into a universal perspective. Only temporarily, however, does she become the privileged “living soul.” The visionary adventure begins for Ianthe upon the unveiling of the past, present, and future.

Located beyond the stars, the realm of the Faery Queen is a “gorgeous dome” (1.27) surrounded by gleaming light. As the battlements of her hall overlook the "immenseness of Heaven.” (1.39) Here Ianthe may behold the past and the present to learn “the secrets of the future’ (1.67) Ianthe surveys the ruins of dead empires, the Faery comments on all that she sees. Shelley creates an image of the world’s body moving toward an unavoidable end, which is analogous to the body of Ianthe which unlike her soul - will also end.

The poem itself moves in a cyclical fashion beginning with the picture of the sleeping Ianthe then moving to her dream ascent. The evolution continues with Ianthe’s experiences in the universal realm, then revolves to her subsequent descent and return to her sleeping position. During this cycle of movement, the poem first reveals dark images of the past and present such as ruined civilizations, an unhappy king, and war. Once the poem reveals the brighter future these darker images are elevated by promises of renewal. The earth will be restored in all its natural and beneficent beauty, and man will be revived with a spirit of enlightenment. Thus, within this short lapse of dream, Ianthe experiences death and rebirth of a civilization. Unlike Prometheus, however, Ianthe is a mere passive observer while the powerful Faery Queen guides her along their course. One should not lose sight of the fact that the entire fantastical journey is purely cerebral. In *Queen Mab* and later visionary poems, Shelley begins his dream sequence upon the awakening of the imagination.

"From the spectacle of the past, the Spirit derives a lesson not to be unlearned - a warning for the future." (III.7-9)

The Faery shows Ianthe the miserable state of the present. In this state an unhappy king appears, more concerned with peaceful rest than riches although his sleep is menaced with terrible dreams. He enjoys no peace because of the disturbed state of his conscience.

> No cessation!
>
> Oh! Must this last forever! Awful death,
>
> I wish, yet fear to clasp thee! - Not one moment
>
> Of dreamless sleep! O dear and blessed peace…(III.64-7)

Shelley sums up the sad condition of the king as one who has been abandoned by nature: "Nature rejects the Monarch, not the man! (III.170) Nevertheless, Shelley saw man as the only one of nature's works that dedicated himself to war and tyranny. The Faery describes man as "formed for deeds of high resolve,' or for "objectness and woe." (IV.154, 159) She also calls war "the statesman's game the priest's delight/the lawyers's jest and the hired assassin's trade." (IV.168-69) Given this sort of vehemence toward man and war, no one can understand how wars that coincided with Shelley's childhood and youth shaped much of the content of his poetic thought and subsequent visions. As Grabo puts it, "Shelley was a visionary not because he failed to see life as it was, but because he was wholly unable to bear the sight. He turned to utopian visions of what the world might be."[11]

In view of all these dark images, the Faery assures Ianthe's questioning spirit that "some eminent in virtue shall start up,/Even in perversest of time." (VI.33-34) The Faery briefly

continues to inform Ianthe of the utopian vision of the world: "How sweet a scene will earth become!/Of purest Spirits a pure dwelling-place," (IV.39-40), until she turns in an instant to speak of the "blood-stained charter of all woe." (IV.56) At times there exists a polarity in *Queen Mab*, between the ideal of the future and the corruption of the past and/or present. There is an implied warning that one should not become entirely consumed with the dream-vision, [9] the poem reminds the reader of the particular injustice or fault that it has focused upon.

After the Faery has stressed "how ludicrous the priest's dogmatic roar" (IV.54), Shelley's sharp denunciation of religion occurs. His ideological argument includes a historical survey of human misery and crime.[4.] Outwardly blaming the condition on superstition and Christian dogma, Shelley also rejects the concept of God as an omnipotent and benevolent being, viewing him rather as a mere vengeful ruler who demands sacrifice and prayer. His argument against such a god is countered with his belief in the Nature-Spirit or World Soul that mediates between heaven and earth, spirit and matter. Stuart Curran sees the Faery as the imaginative agent whose own presence will constantly be regenerated as she mediates between time and eternity.[12] To the opposite, the Faery Queen who is the paragon of human inspiration and spirit, is Shelley's conception of God as a vengeful deity who imposes war on man. With this thought in mind, it becomes apparent that Shelley viewed religion's burdensome dogma as the cause for man's mental distortion, a condition which inhibits him from the liberation that Spirit and Nature could provide.

At the final phase of the visionary process the Faery reveals the future condition of man to the spirit of Ianthe. The world turns into a place of peace where all of the frozen wastes have

become warm. Earth becomes the ideal habitat for regenerated man. The deserts are fertile and the now, tranquil oceans surround numerous sunny islands.[10] "The lion now forgets his thirst for blood…" (VIII.212) Happiness and science now seem to rule the world "whilst every shape and mode of matter lends its force to the omnipotence of mind…"(VIII.235-36) With this perfect vison of the future Ianthes learns not to fear "death's disrobing hand." The Faery tells her that she is "worthy of the boon" and"virtue" will now be her guide. She has received that. After this prophecy, Ianthe's spirit makes its descent in the Faery's glowing chariot back to the present condition on earth.[7]

The dream-vision in *Queen Mab* unites Shelley's ideas of history and renovation through an allegorical figure who would inspire men to relay their redeeming message to other men. In effect, the hope is that all men will commune on a single spiritual plane. The dream-vision as a lesson to all, extends from Shelley's conception of "the great chain of Nature." (II.107) In considering Shelley's deep desire for linkage between man and nature, one may interpret *Queen Mab* as a visionary quest for harmony among the spheres as well as on earth. Regardless, of the poem's flaws in coherence, unity and maturity - Shelley's ability to combine both passionate and abstract arguments with enormous visionary scenes is indisputable. *Queen Mab* is the first in a succession of poems that grow richer in significance as they gain visionary light.

II

ALASTO

R

Shelley's recurring theme of dependence upon the ideal and visionary female appears first in *Alastor* (1815), as a key poem in his philosophical and psychological development. Later poems such as *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life* present the dependence theme in an even greater light. The word "alastor"(in the sense that Shelley intended it), refers to the internal evil spirit, not an evil deity. As allegory, *Alastor*, or evil demon, is the fate that attaches itself to the artist who believes that he has the mortal power to capture an immortal being. Unlike the young poet, Shelley realizes that he is indeed mortal and knows that he must remain within his earthly limitations. A second major theme in *Alastor* demonstrates the hazards of the imagination. The protagonist is pursued by a demon of his own creation. The story illustrates a poetic figure's quest for some embodiment of an ultimate vision of love.

Alastor partly defines itself against the Wordsworthian nature quest. In Shelley's preface, the poem calls upon the forces of mother nature; he asks for the privilege of referring to these forces as his "brothers," since he has always maintained an enormous respect for nature.[13] He also requests that his privilege to commune privately with nature should never be taken away. The first fourty nine lines of the poem express his desire to learn the mysteries of nature which he would poetically utilize with words of this "unfathomable world." (1.18) Most important, in the preface, Shelley stresses that the beautiful maid the poet envisions is only a product of his imagination, the result of a dim perception of the ideal love that lies beyond the veil. Reality confused with vision is an acute problem throughout Shelley's poetry.

The actual story of the young poet begins at line 50, where he is described as a “lovely youth” who left home to seek “strange truths in undiscovered lands.” The “dark fate” (line 59), of Shelley’s protagonist is clearly expressed in that he died a lonely death and was a “youth gone to waste.” The narrator then reveals qualities of the poet’s character and occurrences of his past that led to the poet’s untimely death. Like Shelley, he sought “Nature’s most secret steps" (1.81) while loving it to the fullest and yearning to take his place in its natural beauty.

In this idealized portrait of one kind of romantic hero, two conflicting visions occur, a nature vision and a fatal love vision. The nature vision is referred to as “Solemn - a bright silver dream.” (1.68) This vision, sent to him through sounds from the earth and air, nurtured his deep love for nature as “sent to his heart its choicest impulses.” (1.70) The poet singularly but happily communes with this nature-spirit until he dreams the inward vision that supersedes all reality. To commune in solitude with the spirit of nature no longer satisfies him after he discovers his need for love.

In pursuit of his overarching ambition to be one with nature, the poet travels across the foreign landscapes of Athens, Tyre, Balbec, Jerusalem, and Babylon. As he examines the ruins of these ancient civilizations, he comes across objects which enable him to learn the “thrilling secrets of the birth of time.” (1.128) After this revelation, the poet has become convinced that he has reached the ultimate in human fulfillment. Then, in the “vale of Cashmire” (1.145), he relaxes in the bower and falls into an unforgettable sleep that will alter the remaining course of his life. It is here that the critical passage occurs which establishes a basis for the entire development and integral meaning of the poem.

A vision on his sleep

There came, a dream of hopes that never yet

Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maiden

Sate near him. . .(11.149-52)

After awakening from this lengthy dream, the poet is filled with a new yearning which grows into an obsession. Instead of pursuing his quest for knowledge throughout nature, the poet redirects himself toward the tangible figure of his vision. Jean Hall writes that after the poet's vision "his wanderings are an attempt not at discovery, but at an escape from a fallen state in which his life and world fail to show meaning."[1] Instead of an idealistic quest, the poet's wanderings become a feverish restlessness, an attempt to escape his torment. Yet torment is not emptiness. It is the poet's intense inner need for love and the image of love's fulfillment which initiates his search. When the likelihood of re-encountering his vision grows more obsolete, the poet physically weakens. He is not disappointed with the world he lives in for at one time he was perfectly content with its natural beauty, and he found knowledge in "the fallen state" of ancient civilizations. The "restlessness" and torment which Hall sees in the poet are not a result of emptiness but of an unobtainable vision that is too intense to allow the poet peace. The vision in its favorable light is the internal fulfillment that the poet seeks constantly to maintain. As Carlos Baker phrases the issue, "the mind is energetic in the pursuit of illusions."[2]

The dream vision itself begins on an intellectual level as the veiled maiden begins discussing the truth, knowledge, and virtue. The image of the veiled maiden is made even more ideal when the hero imagines her as a poet. The dooming transgression occurs when the intellectual nature of the dream becomes one of intense passion. For the first time in the poet's

young life, he awakens to another realm of humanity - the realm of human love. Until this point, his solitary quest for knowledge afforded him little room for the bonds of companionship. In the poet's past, he had ignored the charity that townspeople and villagers offered him. He even exhibited a complete ambivalence toward the Arab maiden who loved him.

The maiden of flesh and blood awaits unveiled with their mutual earthly bounds. However, he never acknowledges her potential and reality, but instead he lives to reveal the mystery of the veiled maiden. Hall claims that a "loving relationship with other human beings is precisely what *Alastor* portrays as impossible."[3] This reading is simply untrue. The point Shelley most sincerely stresses in *Alastor* is that earthly love is readily available whenever we open ourselves to its possibilities. Shelley is not as particular about the qualities or associations connected with the veiled maiden as he is with the poet's allowing himself to be deluded into an immediate yearning to recapture that dream. If the poet had returned the Arab maiden's affection then there would have to be earthly love rather than a destructive vision.

The vision itself is anticlimactic; the poet is left as the dream fades before providing sufficient fulfillment, the poet becomes burdened with a heart-breaking image that emerges as his fatal compulsion. James Evans writes that in *Alastor*, "the psychological significance of the identity between vision and self is emphasized because the poet gazes not into a mirror but a dream."[4] It is in that dream where the poet attempts feverishly to embrace the mysterious maiden, but blackness suddenly veils his eyes. The attempted embrace blinds him, and he fails to break through to a union impossible to mortal man. The dream in a prominent sexual light gives only momentary exhilaration that results in nothing more than frustration. Evans calls the poet of *Alastor,* "a creator attempting to live in isolation with his own creations."[5] The poet's

isolation is certain, but he is not a creator; he is merely the recipient of a mysterious, ideal, and fatal dream. Since sexual desire encompasses a measurable portion of our lives, Shelley simply acknowledges the fact and incorporates it as an essential part of his extended allegory…the poet finally awakens; “His wan eyes gaze on the empty scene as vacantly as the ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven.” (11.200-2) This image clearly reveals the solitude and inconsistency of the poet and of the maid in this crucial metaphor. Vacancy of both the moon and its own image questions the reality of the problematic vision. The poet however, begins to dislike the days and longs for the nights with all of their “delightful realms of sleep.” (1.222) It is obvious that the poet mistakes the vivid dream as a glimpse into the ideal world. He acts as though he has had a taste of what it means to experience eternal sleep.

After the vision the poet wanders westward toward India and tours the Orient in his blissful search. Pausing on the Chorasmian Shore, a place of “melancholy wastes” and “putrid marshes” (11.273-4), the ailing and frail poet watches a beautiful swan.

> It rose as he approached and, with strong wings
> Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
> High over the immeasurable main.
> His eyes pursued its flight…(11.277-79)

The lively strength of the swan is played off against the deteriorating condition of the poet. He openly envies the majestic bird and imagines it as flying home to an anxiously awaiting mate. As the swan ascends into the vast and clear expanse of the sky, the poet remains stationary, in

"deaf air to blind earth." (1.289) Shelley starkly conveys an atmosphere of darkness and hopelessness as the poet contemplates sleep and death.

Shelley keeps the notion of the poet's confusion and presumptuousness alive by continually linking concepts of sleep, death, hope, and despair. Shelley suggests then, since sleep has not brought the return of the vision, that perhaps death may prove false as well. Hall contends that perhaps death may prove false as well, because "intense visions can bring death that Shelley shows himself afraid of." But Shelley is not afraid of vision; he merely warns against total consumption of a vision due to intense fascination. Bryan Cooper claims that in *Alastor*, "Shelley denies any hope of immortality." On the contrary, Shelley maintains a great hope in immortality, although it was something that he did not understand nor claim to understand. Shelley was not fearful of death as much as he was perplexed by the possibilities of eternal life in another realm.[7]

Cooper does pay specific attention to the concept of death in *Alastor*. After the dream, the poet seeks to repossess that vision. His search is then aimed at a way of getting into the ideal world. Cooper sees this means of entry as "death, not love," since the vision appeared in sleep. Here the poet relates sleep to death. He yearns for that extreme state as the only means of recompense. Here the hero woefully admits his failure.

> – O, storm of death,
> Whose sightless speed divides this sullen
> night!And thou, colossal Skeleton, that, still
> Guiding its irresistible career
> In thy devastating omnipotence,

Art king of this frail world… (11.609-14)

The young poet has survived the dark storm at sea and thus has overcome his fear of death. In a serene cavern he grasps an old pine tree, symbolic of everlasting life, and he takes in the last image of the "inconstant moon."[1] As the moon's light sinks behind the darkening mountains the poet passes from life. In accordance with his preface, Shelley offers no theories of the world beyond. His task has been completed in illustrating by use of vision, the psychological journey of the mind from the world of reality to the realm of dreams.

After a reading of *Alastor*, the difference between the preface and the poem becomes apparent. The preface seems to validate the poet's quest, while the poem presents a more negative interpretation of that quest. According to the preface, the vision is an "epipsychidion" or a soul out of the poet's very soul.[12] According to the poem, the vision is merely a dream or "a vision…" (11.149-50) In the preface, Shelley says that the poet's imagination embodies all that is "wonderful, or wise, or beautiful" and that the poet is represented as uniting those requisitions.[1] Shelley seems to support the poet's quest when he says that those who love nothing on earth and who do not maintain a hope in anything beyond are "morally dead." Although his quest was destined to fail from the start, the preface considers the poet noble for at least maintaining one goal in his life. The actual poem, however, seems to condemn the quest for no other reason than the fact that he lost all human sympathy.

III

THE WITCH OF ATLAS

The dream-visions in Shelley's poetry took on a new dimension by the summer of 1820 when he composed *The Witch of Atlas*. For the first time, the vision is seen by an immortal being who out of sheer loneliness directs her attention to mortals. The vision in *The Witch of Atla*s is different from that in *Alastor*, the poet becomes obsessed with a single glimpse into the immortal realm. The Witch ultimately finds herself contemplating the condition of man as she mediates between the earth and the stars. Her relationship and concern for mortals provided an essential foundation to the poem.

The first 6 stanzas are dedicated to Mary, (Shelley's wife), who objected to *The Witch of Atlas*. In the first 3 stanzas, Shelley clearly admits that his Witch is a visionary, and he asks Mary if she would be content with his "visionary rhyme." This time Mary dismissed Shelley's attempt and referred to him as a "fanciful visionary, who lived in a world of sensation and dream and was in short, not an intellectual person." In stanza III, Shelley writes, "O, let me not believe/That anything of mine is fit to live." (11.23-24) Mary was still not convinced of Shelley's argument that all of his creations were so ideal that they rank in a higher than mortal realm. In the dedication, Shelley also informs Mary of his "winged vision" which is related to the later appearance of the winged Hermaphrodite. This relation is truly representative of the vision of the poem. The eventual disappearance of the Hermaphrodite represents the failure of the vision as well as the failure of Mary's imagination to see unity in opposing elements - which

play a vital role in the creation of the Witch. By the end of the dedication, Shelley dares Mary to unveil his Witch, knowing that such an attempt would undoubtedly change her mind.

The Witch's beauty is so profound that she both clothed in light and veiled. Anyone who briefly looked upon her form would become like the desperate poet in *Alastor,* enslaved by a vision. The witch's veil is a positive symbol designed not for selfish concealment but for protection for mortals. It is woven of the very materials that she is made of: mist, light, and star beams. Jerrold E. Hogle views the Witch as being veiled from the seeker; she is the figure who must be penetrated in order to bring about truth, but who also can never be known in any absolute conception or clear presence.[2] In this case, the Witch's veil is a mixed blessing because it shadows her perfection but also limits her freedom in that she cannot appear in mortal company without it.

The Witch lives in the Atlas mountains which according to myth, support the heavens. Since Atlas is also the home of Athena, Goddess of Intellect, one might suggest that the Witch may be directly associated with supreme intelligence and spirit. Carl Grabo explains that in order to clearly understand the Witch we must resort to myth.[3]

We are told that the Witch is born of the sun (or Apollo) and one of the Atlantides, who are commonly referred to as Nymphs. The poem is, as Harold Bloom states, "visionary to an extreme," as evidenced most clearly here,"the Sun (line 62) kisses the Nymph with his beams, impregnates her, and makes the cavern his womb"[4] The radiance of the Sun proves too intense for the Nymph who dissolves away in the cavern - which is then the womb. The resulting creation of the Witch is symbolic of the successful union of the two opposing elements of fire and water. On one side, the Witch is like her father, remaining unchangeable, while on the other side she is like her fluid mother, moving through the cyclical generations of mortals.

David Rubin approaches Shelley's composition of the opposites in *The Witch of Atlas* from a more scientific viewpoint. It is the Witch's birth in itself which keeps the elements of fire and water united. As Rubin sees it, there as an expression of potentiality and potency in this union.[5] Rubin assumes that the way in which the natural water cycle is vaporized by the heat of the sun then rises to the clouds and returns as rain or dew which is symbolic of the Witch's unifying potentiality of the imagination. The Witch is united through vision with the fire of the stars, even when submerged in water. She never sleeps but instead, enters her fountain. This is closely connected with her own being, which is also a fusion of fire and water.

The Witch's dwelling place on Atlas is a "cavern by a secret fountain." Grabo sees the cave originally as a symbol of the souls living in this world after their ascent from the divine world into mortality and before their descent to the realm of Pluto.[7] Bloom agrees with Grabo in stating that the cavern is symbolic of the soul shut apart from itself in the individuality and isolation which is characteristic of human life.[8.] Water represents all material things in the world of generation, in which the fountain is a more flexible symbol and can be interpreted as the fountain of beauty from which the Witch receives inspiration. The cavern functions as the womb when the Witch remains within its confines, protected during wintry storms.

In the beginning, the Witch lives alone until the Sea Nymphs offer her companionship, "So they might live forever in the light/Of her sweet presence." (11.223-24) The Witch's rejection of the Nymph's is crucial to the first part of the poem. The Witch is both detached from them yet sympathetic to their condition. The Nymphs are not capable of relationships but

nonetheless, remain cursed by the natural consequences of that ability. The Nymphs are mortal and the Witch bids farewell to avoid mourning their deaths. She cannot shed mortal tears while the sun smiles of their mortal decay. The Witch is, in part, like the persistent sun and therefore must keep herself distanced from all mortals, yet the part of her that is mortal yearns for companionship.

The visionary events and setting continue with what Adelys Wood calls "a playful disregard for the demands of chronology."[9] The Witch is immune to the effects of time, which is therefore an irrelevant topic to the poem. There is a transient nature in *The Witch of Atlas* best described when the Witch reminds the Nymphs of the finite nature of their mortality.

> The boundless Ocean like a drop of dew
> Will be consumed - the stubborn centre
> must
> Be scattered like a cloud of summer dust. (11.230-32)

The images of the Sea as a dew drop and of the earth as more than a dust cloud convey the Shelleyan idea of transcendence in that dew drops evaporate and dust clouds scatter and dissolve. Richard Cronin claims that "Shelley's ability to express both man's devotedness to the conditions of his mortal life and his desire to transcend that necessarily imperfect state is one of his greatest poetic gifts."[10]

After the touching scene of the Witch banishing the Nymphs to their fate of mortality, she returns to her cavern alone, where she remains in a trance before her fountain. In the Witch's most natural state, she is nocturnal. Because she does not sleep, the Witch "celebrates the world of relationship and the state of innocence," and she applauds moral companionship since it is the one faculty that cannot be applied to her perfection.[11]

The real substance of the poem occurs when the Witch acquires a small boat and begins her voyagings. The boat is her visionary vehicle in which she may venture from the stars to all the seas. Shelley provides two possible explanations on how the Witch may have acquired the boat - both mythological. The first claims that Vulcan made it for Venus who, in turn, sold it to Apollo, before giving it to his daughter, the Witch. He changed it into "the fairest and lightest boat/Which ever upon mortal stream did float." (11.295-96) The other explanation describes the boat as a seed nurtured by love which grew in a "gourd-like" fashion, "of which Love scooped with soft motion/Piloted it round the circumfluous Ocean" (11.311-12) Bloom prefers the second explanation since he views the boat as a "visionary vehicle of human desire."[12] Bloom also notes that the boat had its beginnings in the sphere of the morning star, the symbol of infinite human desire. Ironically, in the later half of the poem the star fades, conveying once again the transient quality. Finally, in stanza 34 the boat is moored awaiting in "joyous expectation" (11.320) for the completion of the Hermaphrodite.

The governing imagery is extended when the Witch creates the Hermaphrodite to heal her immortal loneliness. The Hermaphrodite is that "winged vision" which refers back to the dedication to Mary. The Hermaphrodite, like the Witch, is another union of opposites. The Witch "by strange…Kneaded the Hermaphrodite as fire and snow" (1.321) that formed a "repugnant mass" and soon the perfect Hermaphrodite. Grabo refers to the Hermaphrodite as a "symbol of unity and perfection."[13.] While it is indisputable that the Hermaphrodite is a perfected image of opposing elements, it is also a "sexless thing" (1.329) with no male or female characteristics. It possesses an outward grace comparable to that of Bloom appropriately calling the Hermaphrodite a "toy" and "deceitful image of real flesh."[14] The Hermaphrodite is

merely an ambiguous figure, the best that the Witch can do in her necessary isolation. Wood views the Hermaphrodite as human, a symbol of the synthesizing imagination expressed in a created form."[15] Shelley's handing of this symbol reveals what he had come to feel were limitations of his art, for although the Hermaphrodite is the perfect thing, it still cannot love, just as Shelley's poetry can only project an image of love. Since the Hermaphrodite is empty, it eventually vanishes in the poem. The Witch's favorite vision then becomes the love that she sees only among the imperfect race of man.

The first part of the poem closes with the inevitable separation of the Witch from the condition of mortality. The purpose of this part is to express the incompatibility of the world of the Witch with the world of mortality. The second part, however, explores the relative value of the two worlds. What remains of the poem is an account of the Witch's voyagings and pranks. She journeys on a dark stream amid mountains; in accordance with the Platonic imagery which Shelley frequently employs. The stream can be interpreted as the stream of human life. The Witch ultimately goes on to an area of the Antarctic where she hears of "all that had happened new/Between the earth and the moon." (11.476-77)

Like many of Shelley's heroic figures, the Witch travels upward on a course which takes her from her cave to the stars; therefore, her journey can be seen at least in part, as a variation on the theme of the quest for transcendence. Shelley then relates the Witch directly to the world of mortality where she becomes the vehicle by which he can illustrate wishful dreams. The concept of man in a world of conflict is most clearly conveyed when the Witch struggles against the wintry storm in Antarctica. By her Austral lake, the Witch is safe from the storms which surround her. Grabo calls the lake "a fountain of energy" where the Witch may retreat in times of

storm and cold.[18] Whether or not one agrees with Grabo's idea of intentional "energy" and "electricity" throughout the poem, it remains apparent that the Witch does require times of revitalization before continuing on her wandering quest.

Near the end of the poem, the Witch centers attention on earth, were, as Bloom phrases it, "she is hardly an upholder of orthodox morality, religion or politics."[17]

> And she would write strange dreams upon the brain
> Of those who were less beautiful, and make
> All harsh and crooked purposes more vain
> Than in the desert is the serpent's wake
> Which the sand covers - all his evil gain
> The miser in such dreams would rise and shake
> Into a beggar's lap - the lying scribe
> Would his own lies betray without a bribe. (11.617-624)

The Witch's discontentment, in fact, causes her to challenge every symbolic order. In the final stage of her voyagings, when the Witch gives mortal men "strange dreams," she is able to perceive their true natures. The presence of the Witch inspires "sweet visions" in those whom she saw as most beautiful. (1.524) Yet in this gift of vision, there is a double potentiality of transcendence and death. For the beautiful souls, the Witch provides a vision that will turn death into sleep; for the less beautiful, she sends dreams that cause them to betray their own evil desires.

Once again, Shelley's recurrent theme associates visionary experience and death, which accompany almost every interaction between immortal and mortal, ideal and real. As Hogle sees it, "the Witch is the chief negotiator between the real and the imaginary.[18] One must remember

that, although the Witch is perfect in herself, she is limited in her capacity to aid men. She bestows dreams upon those of her choosing but she has no control over what men will do with those visions. Again, the Witch is limited in her power where it concerns death. She can only assist the beautiful among the dead to live in their "dreams beyond the rage/of death or life." (11.613-14) She can decorate the grave, but she cannot summon the soul from the body or lead it to a superior reality. Rubin contends that "Shelley's vision comes to rest in death."[19] It is true that visionary experience is interlocked with death, but it certainly mustn't end there. Man's pursuit toward the vision leads him out of inferior reality to a more transcendent reality. In Grabo's reading, "death is no death is no more a reality than earthly life."[20] The Witch's contempt for the coffin expresses man's refusal to accept his own mortality:

> And she unwound the woven imagery
> Of second childhood's swaddling bands and took
> The coffin, its last cradle, from its niche
> And threw it with contempt into a ditch. (11.606-608)

In this action, the Witch becomes one part of our attitude toward life. Hogle's suggestion that "any vision of death ultimately gives way to a dream of life," contradicts Rubin's reading that vision ends in death. Perhaps, Shelley's intention was to suggest that vision of life and death are one in the same. We are all caught up in an inescapable cycle of birth and death.

Overall *The Witch of Atlas* expresses Shelley's changing poetic faith. Wood writes that "Shelley comes to a realization that poetry is not only inadequate to express pure thought but is false and deceiving because it distorts the thought in the attempt."[21] Shelley does maintain an ambivalence toward his vision, but it is hard to believe that the man for whom "Poets are the

unacknowledged legislators of the world" truly believed that poetry was deceitful or distorting. In *The Witch of Atlas,* Shelley's desire for a redemptive vision which would free us from the endless cycle of life and death prevail, but the extent to which the poem offers us a solution is limited.

An emptiness accompanies the Witch's immortality, similar to the kind found in mortals and her mortal creator - Shelley. Wood sees both Shelley and the Witch as "romantic ironists" in that they expose their own limitations.[22] Neither Shelley nor the Witch seeks to reveal the answers of the universe. The focus on inner fulfillment illustrated in the poem as impossible to achieve not only in mortality but for the first time, also in immortality. By the poem's end the vision dissolves in the "garish" light of the real world. The unsympathetic power of the sun dissolves the same vision which gave life to the Witch. The abrupt way in which the poem ends suggests that it must wait for another time "more fit for weird winter nights" (1.670), during the light of the moon which introduces night and the world of dreams.

IV

EPIPSYCHIDION

In the late autumn of 1820, Shelley composed *Epipsychidion*. It is a unique poem, because it is the first of Shelley's final three visions of the dark quest, which recur in *Adonais* and *The Triumph* of *Life.* The vision quest in *Epipsychidion* attempts to integrate the delusive female sexually and poetically into a restored pastoral paradise. This is one of the central concerns in the poem as the search for an adequate formulation of feeling which involves the paramount presence of love and its necessary tie to imagination. The quest motif then concerns itself with combining the soul (or the poet), with the World-Soul (Emily). Shelley passionately attempts to illustrate this relationship and ultimate union of the souls with an array of images and metaphors.

Literally translated the title means "a little additional soul" or as Shelley puts it himself, "this soul out of my soul." (1.238) *Epipsychidion* expresses the experience of a person who finds himself in the process of change. Generally viewed as Shelley's most autobiographical work, the poem is widely criticized for its emotional excess. John F. Slater contends that Shelley constantly pondered the need to conceal his private self from his audience by revealing a more discreet public alternative. Slater confirms that "Shelley pursues this interest in *Epipsychidion* in matters of self-concealment and self-revelation."[1] The evidence is clear that the poem examines the poet's own internal strife.

Harold Bloom states that "the opening is suspended between public and private declaration with an intense internal frustration."[2] Slater believes that Shelley gained the recognition that even lyrical poetry is a form of public utterance that does violence to privacy of the speaker's inner voice.[3]

The poet's search in *Epipsychidion* may be paralleled to the visionary poet's quest in *Alastor*. The image which the poet desperately seeks to maintain remains consistent with Shelley's image of the ideal being. Once again, the dream-vision describes an immortal female clothed in a light that is so intense that she becomes analogous to the sun. She embodies infinite beauty, intellect, and supreme perfection.

Shelley's success in adequately representing his dream-vision in this poem has been the subject of heated debate. Bloom claims that "the poem affirms images but no image."[4] In the first of the primary three sections of the poem, Shelley does create an abundance of unrelated figures whose fragments do not yield a substantial vision. In the following passage, Shelley provides a variety of alternate imagery which still leave the nature of Emily somewhat ambiguous:

> Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse!
>
> Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!
>
> Thou Moon beyond the clouds!
>
> Thou living Form Among the Dead!
>
> Thou Star above the Storm!
>
> Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!
>
> Thou Harmony of Nature's art!
>
> Thou Mirror, in whom as the splendor of the Sun,

All shapes look glorious which thou gazest on! (11.25-32)

Jean Hall states that, in *Epipsychidion,* Shelley is "a poet not in control of his material."[5] Slater is even more vehement in his attack when he calls Shelley a "philandering lunatic" who uses a conventional tone of voice while remaining callously indifferent to all persons." Perhaps Shelley's colorful assortment of images only expresses inward torment which he desires to rid himself of.

Contrary to the general consensus, Frank P. McConnell sees Shelley's "allusiveness simply as another aspect of his undeniable and compelling unity."[7] Despite the condemnation of rhetoric in *Epipsychidion*, Shelley does maintain an awareness of his poetic limitations which eventually reduces to the more cohesive poetic unity which McConnell praises. This is indeed a major theme in the poem as in the early section which the following lines explicitly thematize the speaker's felt gap between vision and language - ideal and image.

A violent-shrouded grave of Woe? - - I measure
The world of fancies, seeking one like thee,
And find - - alas! mine own infirmity. (11.89-71)

Bloom also defends *Epipsychidion* in asserting that "it is a more visionary poem about poetry than it is a reasoned argument."[8]

This acknowledgment is crucial to an understanding of the poem in that Shelley sought to rise above reason that poses a boundary to the more important - imagination. *Epipsychidion* is therefore one of Shelley's extraordinary attempts to yield the full potential of the imagination and recognize the limits of human relationships and poetic expression.

Epipsychidion encompasses the most idealistic type of thinking along with the actualities of the creative process. It uncovers representations and symbolism of the corrupting forces around and within the poet/narrator. Such forces threaten his integrity and limit his chances of being understood. Shelley was nearly obsessed with the visionary ideal, and he made it his career to seek ways of discovering the meaning of the mind's projection or vision. Carlos Baker reminds us of the "continual expansiveness" of Shelley's imagination and states, "the fault of the poem is not a fault of vision, but is in the multiplicity of ways that the vision is projected." In this sense, *Epipsychidion* is to a large extent, a love poem and more importantly, it is Shelley's attempt to capture and reveal the practically indescribable figure who occupies imagination.

The first part of the poem (lines 1-189), is a lyrical narrative filled with those empathic images that fail at first to depict a comprehensive picture. Shelley even acknowledges this fact in the following lines: "I pray thee that thou blot from this sad song/All of its mortality and wrong." (11.35-6) The first section acclaims Emily, who according Baker, "may be defined as that part of the inmost soul which participates in the World-soul."[10] Shelley uses figurative language in order to describe Emily and his love for her, but as the poem progresses, Shelley becomes aware that he is failing to express his feelings. *Epipsychidion* achieves intensity given that it is a drama about poetic creation itself. In the first 50 lines, Emily appears to have been released from her earthly prison by a kind of dematerialization which transforms her from a "poor captive bird" (1.5) to a "High spirit-winged" (1.13) and "Seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human." (1.21) Shelley frees her and allows her to ascend into a realm of high spirituality.

As Emily ascends higher, the poet becomes more depressed by his earthly bounds, made clear when he identifies with the "worm beneath the sod." (1.128) As a poem about poetry,

the text creates this ascension partly through its opposite, the poet's depression. There is a polarity involved, the necessary and apparent valorization of Emily at the expense of the poet who expresses her against his own depression. In other words, it is not simply as if Emily exists outside of his production of her.

Emily is "Youth's vision thus made perfect." (1.42) She is a manifestation of intellectual perfection and beauty. The distance between her and the poet is more dramatically conveyed by her brightness, which is so intense that it cannot be contained. Carl Wasserman defines Emily as "a world from whose center radiates love and motion."[11] The picture of Emily is therefore a world which is similar to the sun. This idea only describes part of her symbolic perfection and later developed by Shelley's creation of the cosmic universe.

Variously, Emily is termed as an image, a shadow, a reflection, a metaphor and ultimately a vision. (11.115-22) What Emily is, really exists; it is merely Shelley's inability to formulate that existence that indicates an ambiguity of imagination in human nature, which is another of his recurrent themes. Baker calls Emily just "one more metaphor for the Shelleyan epipsyche."[12] Her most intense image is that of light. She is related to a star (the north star or the star of Venus), but more directly she is connected with the sun. The sun plays an important role in the first part of the poem as well as in the scheme of Shelley's cosmological thinking. As in *The Witch of Atlas,* the sun is identified as an immutable transcendent perfection, symbolic of the imagination. The sun is unchanging and eternal which are attributes associated with part of the Witch and Emily. As light, Emily is the immortal transcendent soul who can unite the perfection of the transcendent with the earthly. She can therefore raise the mortal soul to its nearly ideal condition. For the narrator, Emily is his visionary perfection endowed in a female form who had

the ability to reply to his soul. The poet even admits that his soul needs its own perfect and transcendent prototype. Paradoxically, Emily does not make his human existence complete but instead lures him toward death. The poet feels that he is too advanced in mortality to love the mortal Emily and too distanced from immortality to worship her as a visionary ideal. The human dilemma arises because the poet desires both mortal love and immortal worship. Wasserman sees the only possibility of harmony residing in the poet's recognition of his divided nature and dual allegiance.[13] However, Emily remains apart from the poet in this section despite his impassioned efforts to link mortality to the divine. He hopes for a binding relationship with her to persist.

The first section of *Epipsychidion* is a dramatic example of the poet's emotional condition. Wasserman refers to this section of the poem as "babel" and a "confusion of thoughts and images."[14] This section is also a result of the poet's impossible effort to fuse the ordinary and the transcendent into a single image. The one concrete conclusion which is apparent at the end of the first section is that true love is an in exhaustible source of power and pleasure, and any attempt to confine it would be a serious mistake. Otherwise the failure of the first section demonstrates a need for a more controlled treatment of the same themes in the second section.

Lines 190-387 include an idealized history of the poet's thoughts and feelings. Hall has shown that Shelley gains "sophistication in language" as the poem develops."[15] We can see this sophistication in the second section which skillfully sorts images, motifs and thoughts. The section begins with the poet's vision of the ideal being, "She met me, robed in such exceeding glory/That I beheld her not." (11.199-200) The vision comes to him in the caverns of his "dreamy youth." (1.217) Shelley's subterranean imagery along with his repeated use of "wells"

in the first section of the poem suggests a poetic allegiance with nature. The voice of the visioned-being is heard by the poet throughout all of nature. He rises from his dream only to discover that the being has vanished under "the dreary cone of life's shade." (1.288) The poet is tempted to seek his visionary ideal in death just as the poet in *Alastor* but a mysterious voice tells him, "The phantom is beside thee whom thou seekest." (1.233) This passage conveys that earthly man is not unattended by the spirit of perfection. When he asks "Whither 'twas fled, this soul out of my soul,"(1.238) nature can only resound with his lack of knowledge. There is also an echo here of Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* and Shelley's *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.* Night closes and the poet discovers that he, himself, is a world of chaos without the company of the World-soul, a term used by Baker - which I readily accept.

Similar to Dante, the poet wanders through "the wintry forest of our life" (1.249) His search to find the visionary ideal in the mortal realm only leads to deceptive figures. He encounters "One" who has the voice of "venomed melody" and "touch of electric poison." (11.256-58) In lines 261-62, Shelley makes reference to Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*: "And from her living cheeks and bosom flew/A killing air which pierced like honey-dew." Here the poet visionary becomes a magical figure who has apprehensively fed on honey dew. The crucial point is that the dangerous "One" herself participates in the danger that is the poetic vision. Wasserman see the deceptive figures whom the poet encounters as "gruesome parodies of Emily."[16] The poet ultimately finds himself at the edge of a bay "as a hunted deer that could not flee," (1.272) At this moment a type of moon-spirit arrives as an apparent "deliverance" to protect the poet. He is led by the moon-spirit into a cave of dreams. After the moon has gone through all of its phases the poet's spirit is left like "a lampless sea." (1.311) His dreams are abruptly disturbed by storms and earthquakes. "The moving billows of my being fell into a

death of ice, immovable." (11.315-16) It is then Emily who wanders into the wintry forest and allows her light to penetrate him. The welcomed arrival of the vision is a climatic moment of the poem since it triggers the reawakening of the imagination which had previously been immersed in "a death of ice." (1.316)

The important cosmological imagery which occurs in the middle of the poem represents a necessary growth for the poet's mind, since it connects the first section to the last. Shelley's repeated images of earth, moon, and sun all work together to dramatize his search for a meaning that would otherwise remain concealed. The world as a metaphor in the wind and world itself become symbols of one another. The poet's mind is implicitly represented as the dream itself enacted on a visionary earth.

The imagery of the moon is extensive in the second section and vital to the poem's meaning. The soul of the lost poet is rescued from falsehoods by "the cold chaste moon." (1.281) Under the influence of the moon, the soul is neither alive nor dead. The moon provokes the poet's passivity because he is distanced by its "soft yet icy flame," it is also a negative symbol for him since it "warms not, but illumines." (11.284, 286) When the moon fades, the soul grows equally dark and becomes involved in disruptive turbulence. The moon governs the mortal half of the poet's cosmos with the motif of the endless cycle of suitability. Wasserman makes reference to the cosmic metaphor in this section, which is the poet's acceptance of his divided nature and the recognition of his failure to fuse time and eternity.[16] The concept of man's duality then comes into play. Man has two incompatible natures which Wasserman names "the

mortal night of Pan" and "the ideal day of Apollo."[17] Chaos results in the failure to unite these opposing natures into one image.

Shelley invokes a third celestial body when he realizes the dual nature of the poet's "sphere of being." (1.316) The comet represents the morning and evening star of Venus. It will mediate between the sun, and moon joining all things together in cosmic order. The comet, completes the cosmic universe which symbolizes harmony in human life. The imagery of the sun, moon, and comet are used to symbolize the states of the soul. The three parts of the soul, the three ascending aspects of love as a comet, moon, and sun - together signify Shelley's general quest for epipsyche.

The poetry of the third section extends the romantic nature lyric. Lines 388-604 describe the long awaited voyage to the pastoral island under "Ionian skies." (1.422) This final section is the visionary illustration of paradise, the land of divine marriage where the soul will retire with its bride. Baker views the island as an "allegorical representation of the ideal realm of poetry, where the creative soul merges with the World-soul."[18] The island supersedes the cosmic imagery of the second section because it is an alternative world where the poet may fulfill his heart's desire. Wasserman warns however, that although the island parallels a superior perfection, it clearly "belongs to the realm of mutability."[19] The allegorical purity is reduced since the island world is only an alternative.

The island displays a mutual blending of love that will identify the poet with Emily in light of the sexual overtones in its description. The island portrays the act of love because it provides a base for the ultimate union of lovers. This is climatic, the lovers will live a divine existence on that island. Emily and the poet will return after death to the "overhanging"

eternal soul of their island world. Emily is both "sister" and "bride," (11.393, 415), distinctions anticipate the climax of the poem.

> Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
> And our veins beat together; and our lips
> With other eloquence than words, eclipse
> The soul that burns between them, and the wells
> Which boil under our being's inmost cells…(11.565-
> 66)

When Shelley refers to "eloquence other than words," there is a partial implication of the resolution of poetry. This pronounced sexual imagery symbolizes the absolute and permanent union of human spirit along with the divine power it requires.

Love and imagination are crucially related from the beginning of the poem. Shelley compares love to the liberating agencies of the mind that mainly relate to the imagination. Imaginative love for Shelley finds its most effective symbolism in the acts of the body. The fundamental notion throughout *Epipsychidion* suggests that love has an enormously untapped potential. Baker believes that in "the ultimate confinement of Shelley's thought, love is conceived both as that supreme essence which is loved, that eros which impels the soul to love."[19] In *Epipsychidion*, imagination strives to embody the ideal, yet by the poem's end, the poet's love for Emily dissolves in an intended failure of the creative imagination.

> Woe is me!
> The winged words on which my soul would pierce

Into the height of love’s rare Universe,

Are chains of lead around its flight of fire - -

I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (11.587-

91)

V

THE TRIUMPH of LIFE

Shelley's drowning in 1822 left his last great poetical work in an unfinished state. Despite its inconclusive ending, critics have hailed *The Triumph of Life* as one of Shelley's most brilliant works. In the poem, Shelley's darkest vision is attended by a major shift from an eternal life to an elaborate vision of worldly life. *The Triumph of Life* concentrates on the imaginative power and its potential to gain dominance over reason. There is a type of intellectual enslavement depicted in the poem which Fred L. Milne relates to the primacy of the imagination, "displaced in the mind by the interposition of intellectual power that eclipses and usurps imagination's light,[1] left with only the light of reason without imagination experiences a cold and unemotional power." Although the revitalization of imaginative power is integral to *The Triumph of Life*, the apparent failure of the imagination to renew itself reflects an act of rebellion. No matter how grim the poem's vision, Shelley does not lose faith in the imagination; instead, his poem urges that the restoration of imaginative power, necessarily involves man's re- evaluation of himself and an intensification of his impulse toward love.

In many ways, *The Triumph of Life* differs markedly from any of Shelley's previous poems. For once, Shelley is the spectator rather than the protagonist, a role assumed by Rousseau. The new objectivity in *The Triumph of Life* makes Shelley the curious observer who desperately tries to understand the complexity of his vision. The reader primarily encounters Rousseau's internal struggle with the world. The relationship between Shelley and Rousseau in

the poem is fashioned after Dante's and Virgil's in *The Inferno*. The shade of Rousseau acts as a teacher and guide in order to help the narrator understand the "sad pageantry" (1.176) and from "Whence (*he*) came." (1.300) Rousseau's account of his life attempts to answer many of the questions the poem asks. In this dark vision of man's condition, the poem's narrator has an advantage that Rousseau has not, for he can learn from the implications of Rousseau's errors. Ross Woodman sees Shelley as yearning for, yet fearing death in the poem, but regardless of what Shelley's dark images might imply, it must be understood that *The Triumph of Life i*s not a suicidal poem.

Structurally, the poem consists of a prologue, three primary sections, and a final question. In the prologue, the narrator becomes immersed in a waking trance. Dawn turns to dusk and he confronts the fading sun instead of running from the oncoming night.

> Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head,
> When a strange trance over my fancy grew
> Which was not slumber, for the shape it spread
>
> Was so transparent, that the scene came through
> As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
> O'er evening hills they glimmer; and I knew…(11.29-34)

The trance fulfills his desire for darkness but also revitalizes him given the spirit of dawn.

The first major section of the poem opens with a vision of a dusty highway where a multitude of aimless people "hurry to and fro/Numerous as gnats." (11.45-6) The visionary car then advances, driven by the four-faced charioteer. The closer the car approaches, the more

panicked the crowd becomes. Carlos Baker allegorizes the car as that of worldly life.[3] It emits a cold harsh light which ironically attracts the millions who blindly follow it.

After the first vision, the narrator wonders about the meaning of the pageantry and the identity of the mysterious car. A voice calls out "life" (1.180) and the shape of Rousseau appears to the narrator as "an old root which grew/To strange distortion. (11.182-3) Rousseau's earthly existence has left him hideously deformed as a shadow of death. His deformity is an example of one who forfeited the visionary and followed the millions behind the chariot of life, in his own words, one who feared, loved, hated, suffered, did and died…"(1.200) Milne asserts that Rousseau's gross, eyeless appearance reflects spiritual corruption and the denial of the imagination suffered during life. For Milne, Rousseau's ultimate fate represents all those who forsake the light of the imagination for a "false, deluding, and loveless light."

After the introduction, the narrator asks "Who are those chained to the car?" Rousseau answers that they are "The wise/The great," and "The forgotten" (11.209-10), who never learned to know themselves. Those who are actually chained to the chariot are the most important in the procession. They are supposedly, the enlightened leaders of men such as Frederick, Catherine the Great, Napoleon and Leopold II; these people are chained and blinded because they have deluded themselves into believing that the light to which they are enslaved reveals truth. Those missing from the procession prove that what is depicted in the poem is not necessarily an inevitable aspect of the human condition. Shelley saw humanity as a race trapped between inevitable change and divine aspiration. The "sacred few" (1.128) namely, Socrates and Jesus, represent those who escape the blissful car of life because their predominant feelings of love singularly motivate their imaginative power. The clear comprehension that the sacred few have

for the vision enables them to see through material life and ignore its attraction. Donald Reiman claims that *The Triumph of Life* gains its power by its very vagueness as to which men belong among the sacred few, "they of Athens and Jerusalem" (1.134) who represented the best in Hellenic and Hebraic traditions and who preserved the purity of their ideals and lives conformity to the mundane."[5] Those in the procession however, deliberately turn their backs on the impulse of their own "living flame" (1.130) and therefore suffer in contrast to the sacred few who learned to harmonize with, rather than oppose, their power to love. The sacred few chose to follow their imaginations and to love in the highest spiritual sense without regard for themselves. Their example can be viewed as a way in which man can emancipate himself from the darkness of self-imposed slavery. As the narrator continues to watch the triumphal procession his eyes grow "sick of the perpetual flow," and his heart becomes one of "sad thought." (11.298-9) He then asks Rousseau just how he came to sit by the highway of life. The narrator's questions are a hopeful sign that he might come to an understanding of the possible ramifications of his own misdirection away from selfish love.

The third major section of the poem is the most intricate and crucial, for here, Rousseau imagines the visionary ideal by which the narrator may re-evaluate his own confused condition. Rousseau's idealized history is similar to Shelley's in *Epipshychidion*. The difference is that when Rousseau's vision fades, he joins the worldly procession instead of continuing his search for vision, whereas Shelley relentlessly searches. Rousseau begins with what seems to be the very beginning of his life "in the April prime." (1.307) He claims that when he awoke in the morning that he was surrounded by a strange new landscape without any prior knowledge of life. The vision of paradise that Rousseau confronts is worked out in such fine detail that Baker insists

that "one must place himself in full possession of the picture which was evidently in Shelley's mind."[6] Dawning Eden offers Rousseau a promise of salvation, but he remains discontent primarily because he cannot remember the past.

> Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,
> I know not. I arose, and for a space
> The scene of woods and waters seemed to keep…(11.332-34)

According to Quint, Rousseau's forgetfulness "reveals a latent negativity of the imagination which will turn upon itself and invite its own destruction."[7] Rousseau's desire to know the shape of the past and the future leaves him at odds with the present. Hall calls Rousseau "time ridden" by the fact that he quests to find eternity in the present.[8] Hall also believes that "Rousseau must control all time,"[11] which Rousseau's attempt to arrest the vision of Iris demonstrates.[9]

Shelley's characteristic use of stream and cavern imagery repeats in *The Triumph of Life* through the rivers of Rousseau's vision. Lloyd Abbey notes, "his words do not flow to an eternal sea but instead are transformed into the stream of life's wretched captives."[10] Milne states that "Shelley's stream induces forgetfulness upon which the Shelleyan sin of selfhood is predicted."[11] Abbey also explains the river as a "metaphoric exploitation of the river of life," which is understood by realizing that those who try hardest to escape life's cycle are those who soonest succumb.[12] The source of life's stream, however remains a mystery since it is the cavern which hides Rousseau's river world.

Rousseau's description of his cavern surroundings does not include a direct vision of the sun, but of an indirect vision which is reflected in the water of the fountain, located inside the cavern which is the source of the stream.

And, as I looked, the bright omnipresence

Of morning through the orient cavern flowed,

And the Sun's image radiantly intense

Burned on the waters of the well that glowed

Like gold, and threaded all the forest's maze

With winding paths of emerald fire; there stood

Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze

Or of his own glory, on the vibrating

Floor of the fountain, paved with flashin

rays…(11.345-52)

If Rousseau were to directly look at the sun he would have to move east through "the orient cavern." (1.344) Frequently throughout the poem, Rousseau's actions parallel in reverse those of the narrator. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator lies down facing the west, while Rousseau later rises from his sleep and faces the east. The narrator's actions reflect a dying state, while those of Rousseau suggest a type of renewal or rebirth.

According to Milne, the cavern is "the point of interchange between physical life and existence at the center where the individual's spirit is enfolded in the "light diviner" radiating from the metaphysical sun, which is the only true center of reality.[13] Reiman writes, "it exists in the world of human experience and represents imagination."[14.] As Rousseau faces east towards the cavern, the sun's rays strike upon the water of the fountain, which in turn produces an image of "all light." The sun's reflected image is a figure of its diffused light which divides into a

rainbow spectrum of colors as it shines from the sun's intense radiance. The result is Iris "in her may coloured scarf." (1.357) Shelley's last embodiment of true poetic power is in the figure of a woman. Bloom calls Iris "the light of everyday which tramples into dust, Rousseau's spark imaginative vision.[15] Baker on the other hand, sees Iris as Rousseau's "epipsyche" similar to Shelley's Emily in *Epipsychidion*.[16] Whatever Iris' function she is still primarily a vision, a refraction of light - a rainbow. Quint sees Iris as a "mere incarnation of desire, equipped with her dangers."[17]

The Triumph of Life reflects Shelley's awareness that a renovated society is next to impossible. Perhaps, for this reason, he draws out the negative qualities of Iris, since her power resides in the imaginative vision of nature. She is able to obsess the mind of her creator with her musical allure.

> Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow
> Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream
> That whispered with delight to be their pillow.
>
> As one enamoured is upborned in dream
> O'er lily-paven lakes 'mid silver mist,
> To wondrous music, so this shape might seem
>
> Partly to tread the waves with feet which kist
> The dancing foam; partly to glide along
> The air that roughened the moist amethyst. . .(11.365-6, 369-72)

During this vision of Iris, Rousseau describes himself in a state of suspension. In this suspended

state, he hesitated to accept the truth of what he sees, which is conveyed by his repeated use of the word. When Rousseau repeats the narrator's earlier actions in asking about mysteries of his origins, Iris commands him to "Arise and quench thy thirst." (1.400) She offers him a cup of Nepenthe, a liquor said to erase all sorrow, pain, and anger.[18] When Rousseau touches the cup, however, his brain turns to sand and the vision of Iris fades in the common light of day.

Rousseau's mistakedly believes that the vision of Iris contains the answer to all his lofty questions. But Iris, like so many of Shelley's visionary figures, cannot be transcended because that would be to reach beyond the range of poetry. Abbey correctly assumes that Iris' mysterious gift of Nepenthe, like Rousseau's long response to Shelley's questions, does nothing to resolve the issues of life's origins or ultimate significance.[19] Rousseau sadly discovers that a world thirst for all knowledge is limitless and therefore unquenchable.

As a result of his touching Iris' cup, Rousseau's spiritual senses are overcome by a new vision of the "cold bright car." (1.434) In *Epipsychidion* the chariot's light only illuminates and attributes nothing to the imagination, unlike the sun's eternal power. Even in the excess of the cold light and "savage music" (1.435), Rousseau is reminded of the faded rainbow vision. His vision of Iris has become just as destructive as the poet's vision of the ideal lady in *Alastor*. Moreover, the vision can be dangerous to others since Rousseau does not understand his own process of creativity. Rousseau's willing subjection to Iris paradoxically destroys the very imagination that he created for her.

Man's world, seen as a triumphal or imperial procession, is displayed most vividly in Rousseau's vision of the chariot of life. The masses in this procession find themselves in a type of Hell because of their thirst for eternity. Victims of their own individual compulsions, they enslave themselves to the chariot. Life ultimately rules them because their pursuit of their

desires must eventually be paid with the sacrifice of their own lives. As Hall remarks, "it is their longing for Heaven that delivers them to Hell."[20] In this day-long triumph, individuals are deformed and sent to a premature death. The pageantry lasts for a day that encompasses the entire lifetime of Rousseau, the narrator and mankind.

The last part of Rousseau's narrative describes his cowardice as he recalls one more phenomenon which occurred right after he joined the procession of that bright car. A barrage of furious phantoms occupied the air along the chariot tracks. As Rousseau witnesses this, he watches all the beauty, freshness and strength fade from each of the human forms who followed the chariot. Quint views Rousseau's own fall behind the chariot as "a defiant suicidal gesture than a surrender to the common human lot."[21.] Whichever gesture is correct, it is one which he later chooses to revoke upon witnessing the horrors that surround the chariot. Still, Rousseau differs from the other followers of the chariot, for, unlike them, he has not submitted to historical ideologies but rather to the creation of his own imagination. In this, Shelley identifies a fatal fault not in history, but within ourselves. According to Abbey, "the life chariot prompts its captives to create the very phantoms that destroy them and in Shelley's vision of life's highway, men create their own destructive shadows."[22]

There is a great deal of polarity in *The Triumph of Life* as the experiences of Rousseau parallel those of the narrator. Rousseau and the narrator provide us with two perspectives on the same day, sunrise, and visionary experience. The narrator's sleep is inhibited by a strange waking trance in which he first perceives the highway of life and life's chariot. Rousseau awakens to perceive the same chariot and his concluding vision of men enslaved to it recalls the confused sequence of seasonal images in the speaker's narrative. Just as the people on the speaker's public way are numerous as "gnats upon the evening gleam," (1.46) so are the

phantoms of Rousseau's concluding vision, "small gnats and flies as thick as mist/On evening marshes." (11.508-9) The people whom Shelley sees are like "the million leaves of summer's bier," (1.51); the shadows which fall away from the people in Rousseau's visions are numerous as the "dead leaves blown/In autumn evening from a poplar tree." (11.528-9) Both Shelley and Rousseau's visions juxtapose images of evening and autumn with other seasonal figures and images related to the sun which suggest an endless nature cycle. This notion was already strongly developed in *The Witch of Atlas*.

The narrator seems almost to repeat Rousseau's own error of seeking the truths of existence, and, in this sense, he falls along with Rousseau. When man is dominated by the cold light of reason alone, he extinguishes his "living flame," his own visionary capacity. Milne claims that for Rousseau, it is only death which has revived his divine spark.[23] However, it is not too late for the speaker, for in the poem's unconcluded state he is still suspended as Rousseau once was, between the night and day of his outside trance. Rousseau finally tells the narrator that he has "fallen by the wayside," which represents his release from the "deluded crew." (11.641,184) Rousseau has come full circle in the poem as he exhibits the redeeming quality of love.

If Shelley had lived, perhaps he might have provided the narrator with a rounded conclusion to his trance with invigorating signs of redemption, similar to Rousseau's experience. In its unfinished state, the poem comes to its fragmentary close when the narrator asks:

> And fell, as I have fallen, by the wayside; -
>
> Those soonest from whose forms most shadows passed,
>
> And least of strength and beauty did abide.

Then, what is life? I cried - (11.544-546)

The final question suggests that worldly life is composed greatly of deformity and corruption. Against this negativity though, is Shelley's last hint of the restoration of the visionary ideal Rousseau answers, "Happy those for whom they fold." (11.547-8) Shelley intended to provide an inspirational poem that would compel his narrator to rise above selfishness and aspire to the quest for love, which is as endless as it is vital to the human spirit.

CONCLUSION

A study of Shelley's poems tells the reader that his world is limitless. It is a world in which truths are formulated but where no final vision of truth is possible, a fact that Shelley especially became aware of toward the end of his career. Shelley's poems repeatedly reveal shades of himself but never totally unveil his underlying real self. What we really see in Shelley's visionary moments are images of ourselves as well. The vision is always much more than the arrival of some mysterious figure from within; it is an invitation for change, a vision which entices us from stagnation to movement. The vision is not absolutely explicit in meaning for, when it comes right down to it, we must interpret for ourselves, a fact that the poet was certainly aware of. Shelley's visions, therefore, require a sophisticated and idealistic reading more poetic than literal. Shelley's visionary poems typically end by calling themselves into question. Such ends call attention to the poem not as real world, but as a poetic world, not as truth but as vision.

Critics continually discuss Shelley's skepticism without recognizing the great deal of enthusiasm that also accompanies his work. He was able to blend his opposing feelings of skepticism and enthusiasm into a coherent poetic unity.

The Shelley poem is indirectly related to life in that it becomes a humanistic version of paradise. The atheistic Shelley offers the world of poetry in exchange for the Christian's heaven. The resultant vision is an ideal based on empirical awareness. Shelley's faith in culture or in man in general may even seem excessive at times, which should make us realize that our modern

day skepticism is far more radical than Shelley's. Like the *Witch of Atlas*, Shelley simply did the best he could do in his state of mortality. Although his visions were creative self-expressions of hope, he never lost sight of his limitations as a poet or a man. Shelley's essay *On Life* provides a compelling summation of our earthly bounds:

"We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments; welive on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being?"[1]

NOTES

I

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3. Ross Woodman, T*he Apocalyptic Vision in Shelley's Poetry* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1964) p. 74

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10. Grabo, p. 111

11. Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabil*s (California: Anderson, Ritchie & Simon, 1975) p. 17

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1. Jean Rall, *The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetr*y (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1940) pp. 27-8

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3. Hall, p. 29

4. James Evans, *Masks of the Poet: A Study of Self-Confrontation in 'Alastor'* (Keats- Shelley Journal, 1975) p. 72

5. Evans, p. 74

6. Hall, p. 28

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8. Ibid

9. Baker, p. 60

10. Ibid

11. Ibid

12. Evan K. Gibson, *Alastor: A Reinterpretation, in Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald Reiman, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977) p. 547

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2. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Metaphor and Metamorphosis in Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas,' Studies in Romanticism,* 19 (1980), p. 347

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8. Bloom, p. 175

9. Adelys Wood, *Shelley's Ironic Vision: 'The Witch of Atlas,'* (Keats-Shelley Journal 26 1980) p.70

10. Richard Cronin, *Shelley's 'Witch of Atlas,'* (Keats-Shelley Journal 26 (1977) p. 98

11. Bloom, p.170

12. Bloom p. 193

13. Grabo, p. 83

14. Bloom, p. 200

15. Wood, p. 78

16. Grabo, p. 83

17. Bloom, p. 200

18. Hogle, p. 343

19. Rubin, p. 226

20. Grabo, p. 100

21. Wood, p. 77

22. Wood, p.76

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2. Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmakin*g (New Haven: Yale Press, 1959) p. 209

3. Slater, p. 282

4. Bloom, p. 210

5. Jean Hall, *The Transforming Image: A Study of University of Illinois Shelley's Major Poetr*y (Chicago Press, 1980) p. 107

6. Slater, p. 290

7. Frank P. McConnell, *Shelleyan Allegory: 'Epipsychidion'* (Keats-Shelley Journal, 20) 1971, p. 110

8. Bloom, p. 206

9. Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p 218

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11. Earl R. Wasserman, Shelley: A Critical Reading (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971) p. 455

12. Baker, p.218

13. Wasserman, p.434

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15. Hall, p.113

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18. Baker, p. 237

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14. Reiman, p. 15

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17. Quint, p. 65

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CONCLUSION

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