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 PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY
Song of Apollo<sup>1</sup>

The sleepless Hours who watch me as I lie  
     Curtained with star-enwoven tapestries  
 From the broad moonlight of the open sky;  
     Fanning the busy dreams from my dim eyes,  
 Waken me when their mother, the grey Dawn,                     5  
 Tells them that Dreams and that the moon is gone.

Then I arise; and climbing Heaven's blue dome,  
     I walk over the mountains and the waves,  
 Leaving my robe upon the Ocean foam.  
     My footsteps pave the clouds with fire; the caves                     10  
 Are filled with my bright presence, and the air  
 Leaves the green Earth to my embraces bare.

The sunbeams are my shafts with which I kill  
     Deceit, that loves the night and fears the day.  
 All men who do, or even imagine ill                                     15  
     Fly<sup>2</sup> me; and from the glory of my ray  
 Good minds, and open actions take new might  
 Until diminished, by the reign of night.

I feed the clouds, the rainbows and the flowers  
     With their aetherial colours; the moon's globe                     20  
 And the pure stars in their eternal bowers

1. Written for the opening scene in Mary Shelley's verse drama *Midas*. Apollo, god of the sun, of healing, and of poetry and the other arts, sings this serenely Olympian hymn in a contest with Pan, the goatlike deity of flocks, forests, and wildlife. In the play old Tmolus, a mountain god who judges the contest, awards the prize to Apollo; when Midas, a mortal, objects, preferring Pan's song of earthly desire, passions, and suffering, Apollo affixes on him ass's ears.

2. Flee from.

Are cinctured<sup>3</sup> with my power as with a robe;  
 Whatever lamps on Earth or Heaven may shine  
 Are portions of one spirit; which is mine.

I stand at noon upon the peak of Heaven; 25  
 Then with unwilling steps, I linger down  
 Into the clouds of the Atlantic even.

For grief that I depart they weep and frown—  
 What look is more delightful, than the smile  
 With which I soothe them from the Western isle? 30

I am the eye with which the Universe  
 Beholds itself, and knows it is divine.  
 All harmony of instrument and verse,  
 All prophecy and medicine are mine;  
 All light of art or nature — to my song 35  
 Victory and praise, in its own right, belong.

1820

1824

### To Jane. The Invitation<sup>1</sup>

Best and brightest, come away—  
 Fairer far than this fair day  
 Which like thee to those in sorrow  
 Comes to bid a sweet good-morrow  
 To the rough year just awake 5  
 In its cradle on the brake.<sup>2</sup>—  
 The brightest hour of unborn spring  
 Through the winter wandering  
 Found, it seems, this halcyon<sup>3</sup> morn  
 To hoar February born; 10

3. Girdled.

1. This invitation to an outdoor excursion exemplifies Shelley's grace and urbanity, writing in the ancient tradition of the verse letter. "Jane" is Jane Williams, the common-law wife of Edward Williams, Shelley's close friend.

2. Thicket.

3. Calm and peaceful.

TO JANE. THE INVITATION

3

Bending from Heaven in azure mirth  
It kissed the forehead of the earth  
And smiled upon the silent sea,  
And bade the frozen streams be free  
And waked to music all their fountains, 15  
And breathed upon the frozen mountains,  
And like a prophetess of May  
Strewed flowers upon the barren way,  
Making the wintry world appear  
Like one on whom thou smilest, dear. 20

Away, away from men and towns  
To the wild wood and the downs,  
To the silent wilderness  
Where the soul need not repress  
Its music lest it should not find 25  
An echo in another's mind,  
While the touch of Nature's art  
Harmonizes heart to heart. —  
I leave this notice on my door  
For each accustomed visitor — 30  
“I am gone into the fields  
To take what this sweet hour yields.  
Reflexion, you may come tomorrow,  
Sit by the fireside with Sorrow —  
You, with the unpaid bill, Despair, 35  
You, tiresome verse-reciter Care,  
I will pay you in the grave,  
Death will listen to your stave<sup>4</sup> —  
Expectation too, be off!  
To-day is for itself enough — 40  
Hope, in pity mock not woe  
With smiles, nor follow where I go;  
Long having lived on thy sweet food,  
At length I find one moment's good

4. Stanza, set of verses.

After long pain — with all your love 45  
 This you never told me of.”

Radiant Sister of the day,  
 Awake, arise and come away  
 To the wild woods and the plains  
 And the pools where winter-rains 50  
 Image all their roof of leaves,  
 Where the pine its garland weaves  
 Of sapless green and ivy dun  
 Round stems that never kiss the Sun —  
 Where the lawns and pastures be 55  
 And the sandhills of the sea —  
 Where the melting hoar-frost wets  
 The daisy-star that never sets,  
 And wind-flowers, and violets  
 Which yet join not scent to hue 60  
 Crown the pale year weak and new,  
 When the night is left behind  
 In the deep east dun and blind  
 And the blue noon is over us,  
 And the multitudinous 65  
 Billows murmur at our feet  
 Where the earth and ocean meet,  
 And all things seem only one  
 In the universal Sun. —

1822

1824

The Triumph of Life Shelley left this poem unfinished when he died in early July 1822. He took its central event from Petrarch’s poems called *Trionfi* — in these, as in Shelley’s poem, “triumph” has the meaning of the Latin *triumphus*, the ceremonial entrance of a victorious general into ancient Rome in a procession that included his prisoners of war. The poem is strongly influenced by Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, not only in its *terza rima* (the verse form also of Petrarch’s *Trionfi*) but also in overall conception, in a number of narrative details, and in style. It is notable that Shelley, like Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, left unfinished at his death a long poem in the form of a

Dantean dream-vision, in which the poet faces up to the discovery that human history has been a continuous process of suffering and defeat—and in Shelley's version, an almost unrelieved narrative of human weakness and evil-doing.

We ought to be wary, however, of a tendency to dramatize Shelley's career by imposing on it the form of a tragic plot, moving inexorably to *The Triumph of Life*, from which there was no exit except the poet's own death. The vision in the poem of the frantic, quiescent, or despairing captives in the procession of Life—including all who have in the least degree compromised in spirit or aspiration with the passions, temptations, or values of fleshly life and the material world—is a desolate one, but its darkness is not unrelieved. There are, for example, the “sacred few” among humanity who have not compromised at all. Also, the band of “mighty captives” chained to Life's chariot represent a full spectrum of relative worth, from mighty villains to mighty heroes. And although we lack Shelley's answer to the question posed at the end of the fragment—“then, what is Life?”—there is no determinative evidence that he planned to depart from the precedent of all his other long poems, in which he allowed some scope of possibility for redeeming life by the cardinal Shelleyan virtues—above all by that love which, as he says near the close of *The Triumph of Life* (lines 472–76), led Dante safely “from the lowest depths of Hell” through Purgatory to Heaven and back to earth.

But any statement of how Shelley would have ended this fragment is speculative. What is certain is the vitality and the timbre of the poetic voice in the portion before us. No other narrative poem quite matches in its opening the assurance of Shelley's forty-line induction, as the sun springs forth like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, to be greeted with the quiet ceremonies of natural worship by the revolving world, to whom it brings light, heat, and joyous reawakening—to all except the poet, who composes himself to sleep as the world awakes, to undergo, in the transparent darkness of a trance, the crisis of his vision. And the promise of this extraordinary opening is fulfilled in the unflagging narrative drive, and in the ease and precision of language, of the rest of the poem, which expresses an élan even in its grimmest passages.

*The Triumph of Life* sounds like the voice, not of a defeated poet, but of a poet who, just attaining the height of his powers, was making a masterful new beginning.

## The Triumph of Life

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

5

Of light, the Ocean's orison<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> incense lit by the new ray

10

Burned slow and inconsumably, and sent  
Their odorous sighs up to the smiling air,  
And in succession due, did Continent,

15

Isle, Ocean, and all things that in them wear  
The form and character of mortal mould  
Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear

Their portion of the toil which he of old  
Took as his own and then imposed on them;  
But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold

20

Had kept as wakeful as the stars that gem  
The cone of night,<sup>3</sup> now they were laid asleep,  
Stretched my faint limbs beneath the hoary stem

Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep

25

1. Prayer—to which (in the next line) the birds attuned their chanted morning prayer (“matin lay”).

2. Eastern, morning.

3. The conical shadow cast by the earth as it intercepts the light of the sun.

Of a green Apennine:<sup>4</sup> before me fled  
The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep

Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head  
When a strange trance over my fancy grew  
Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread 30

Was so transparent that the scene came through  
As clear as when a veil of light is drawn  
O'er evening hills they glimmer;<sup>5</sup> and I knew

That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,  
Bathed in the same cold dew my brow and hair 35  
And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn

Under the self same bough, and heard as there  
The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold  
Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.  
And then a Vision on my brain was rolled. . . . 40

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As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay  
This was the tenour of my waking dream.  
Methought I sate beside a public way

Thick strewn with summer dust, and a great stream  
Of people there was hurrying to and fro 45  
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 50

4. The Apennines are a chain of mountains extending down the peninsula of Italy.

5. Apparently, "[so that] they glimmer."

One of the million leaves of summer's bier.—  
 Old age and youth, manhood and infancy,

Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,  
 Some flying from the thing they feared and some  
 Seeking the object of another's fear, 55

And others as with steps towards the tomb  
 Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,  
 And others mournfully within the gloom

Of their own shadow walked, and called it death . . .  
 And some fled from it<sup>6</sup> as it were a ghost, 60  
 Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.

But more with motions which each other crost  
 Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw  
 Or birds within the noonday ether lost,

Upon that path where flowers never grew; 65  
 And weary with vain toil and faint for thirst  
 Heard not the fountains whose melodious dew

Out of their mossy cells forever burst  
 Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told  
 Of grassy paths, and wood lawns interspersed 70

With overarching elms and caverns cold,  
 And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they  
 Pursued their serious folly as of old. . . .

And as I gazed methought that in the way  
 The throng grew wilder, as the woods of June 75  
 When the South wind shakes the extinguished day.—

6. I.e., from their own shadow ("death").

And a cold glare, intenser than the noon  
 But icy cold, obscured with [blinding]<sup>7</sup> light  
 The Sun as he the stars. Like the young Moon

When on the sunlit limits of the night 80  
 Her white shell trembles amid crimson air  
 And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might

Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear  
 The ghost of her dead Mother, whose dim form  
 Bends in the dark ether from her infant's chair,<sup>8</sup> 85

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, 90  
 And o'er what seemed the head a cloud like crape

Was bent, a dun<sup>9</sup> and faint ethereal gloom  
 Tempering the light; upon the chariot's beam  
 A Janus-visaged<sup>1</sup> Shadow did assume

The guidance of that wonder-winged team. 95  
 The Shapes which drew it in thick lightnings  
 Were lost: I heard alone on the air's soft stream

7. Mary Shelley filled in a blank space in the manuscript with "blinding."

8. The crescent new moon bearing the faint outline of the full moon in its arms—the omen of a coming storm, as in the epigraph and lines 9–14 of Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode*. The parallel is to the crescent-formed chariot bearing the dark Shape of Life.

9. Dark. "Cloud" is the subject of "was bent." "Crape": black cloth, worn in mourning.

1. The Roman god Janus was represented with two faces, looking before and after. The shadowy charioteer guiding his team (which is invisible in the glare), however, has four faces, all of them blindfolded ("banded," line 100). Harold Bloom points out that this description of the chariot of Life is a parodic version of Ezekiel's vision of a divine chariot in the likeness of four living creatures, each having four faces and, in their progress, forming rings that "were full of eyes" (Ezekiel 1.4–28 and echoed in *Paradise Lost* 6.749–72).

The music of their ever moving wings.  
 All the four faces of that charioteer  
 Had their eyes banded . . . little profit brings 100

Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,  
 Nor then avail the beams that quench the Sun<sup>2</sup>  
 Or that these banded eyes could pierce the sphere

Of all that is, has been, or will be done. —  
 So ill was the car guided, but it past 105  
 With solemn speed majestically on . . .

The crowd gave way, and I arose aghast,  
 Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance,  
 And saw like clouds upon the thunder blast

The million with fierce song and maniac dance 110  
 Raging around; such seemed the jubilee  
 As when to greet some conqueror's advance

Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea  
 From senatehouse and prison and theatre  
 When Freedom left those who upon the free 115

Had bound a yoke which soon they stooped to bear.<sup>3</sup>  
 Nor wanted here the just similitude  
 Of a triumphal pageant, for where'er

The chariot rolled a captive multitude  
 Was driven; all those who had grown old in power 120  
 Or misery, — all who have their age subdued,

2. As described in lines 77–79.

3. I.e., when those who had enslaved others lost their own freedom, bearing the yoke they had imposed on others.

By action or by suffering, and whose hour  
 Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe,  
 So that the trunk survived both fruit and flower;

All those whose fame or infamy must grow 125  
 Till the great winter lay the form and name  
 Of their own earth with them forever low<sup>4</sup>—

All but the sacred few who could not tame  
 Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon  
 As they had touched the world with living flame 130

Fled back like eagles to their native noon,<sup>5</sup>  
 Or those who put aside the diadem  
 Of earthly thrones or gems, till the last one

Were there; for they of Athens and Jerusalem<sup>6</sup>  
 Were neither mid the mighty captives seen 135  
 Nor mid the ribald crowd that followed them

Or fled before. . . . Swift, fierce and obscene  
 The wild dance maddens in the van, and those  
 Who lead it, fleet as shadows on the green,

Outspeed the chariot and without repose 140  
 Mix with each other in tempestuous measure  
 To savage music. . . . Wilder as it grows,

They, tortured by the agonizing pleasure,  
 Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun  
 Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure 145

4. I.e., Until the world shall end in ice.

5. Alluding to the legend that aged eagles renew their youth by flying toward the sun.

6. In the Roman triumphs, the conquered chieftains were chained to the conqueror's chariot, to heighten their dishonor. In Shelley's version, this "captive multitude" bound to the chariot (lines 118–20) includes all those whose exceptional power or talent had made them famous or infamous (line 125), except the "sacred few" (line 128). The latter are divided into two classes: those who had died young, and those who, having lived into older age, had resisted the corrupting influence of "earthly thrones or gems" (line 133). These few included, doubtless, Socrates and Jesus ("of Athens and Jerusalem").

Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,  
 Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair,  
 And in their dance round her who dims the Sun

Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air  
 As their feet twinkle; now recede and now  
 Bending within each other's atmosphere 150

Kindle invisibly; and as they glow  
 Like moths by light attracted and repelled,  
 Oft to new bright destruction come and go,

Till like two clouds into one vale impelled 155  
 That shake the mountains when their lightnings mingle  
 And die in rain,—the fiery band which held

Their natures, snaps . . . ere the shock cease to tingle  
 One falls and then another in the path  
 Senseless, nor is the desolation single, 160

Yet ere I can say *where* the chariot hath  
 Past over them; nor other trace I find  
 But as of foam after the Ocean's wrath

Is spent upon the desert shore.—Behind,  
 Old men, and women foully disarrayed 165  
 Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind,

Limp in the dance and strain with limbs decayed  
 To reach the car of light which leaves them still  
 Farther behind and deeper in the shade.

But not the less with impotence of will 170  
 They wheel, though ghastly shadows interpose  
 Round them and round each other, and fulfill

Their work and to the dust whence they arose  
 Sink and corruption veils them as they lie—  
 And frost in these performs what fire in those.<sup>7</sup> 175

Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,  
 Half to myself I said, “And what is this?  
 Whose shape is that within the car? and why” —

I would have added — “is all here amiss?”  
 But a voice answered . . . “Life” . . . I turned and knew 180  
 (O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)

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

And that the grass which methought hung so wide 185  
 And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,  
 And that the holes it vainly sought to hide

Were or had been eyes. — “If thou canst forbear  
 To join the dance, which I had well forborne,”<sup>8</sup>  
 Said the grim Feature,<sup>9</sup> of my thought aware, 190

“I will tell all that which to this deep scorn  
 Led me and my companions, and relate  
 The progress of the pageant since the morn;

“If thirst of knowledge doth not thus abate,  
 Follow it even to the night, but I 195  
 Am weary” . . . Then like one who with the weight

7. I.e., “frost destroys these old people, as fire had destroyed those young people.” In addition to the “mighty captives” described in lines 118–27, there are two other groups: (1) the young men and women in front of the chariot who, in an erotic frenzy, dance, couple, fall senseless, and are crushed, leaving as their only trace a sexual foam (lines 137–64); and (2) the old men and women at the rear of the procession, attempting impotently to catch up with the chariot and to imitate the young in their bacchanalian dance (lines 164–75).

8. I.e., “Which I would have done well to avoid.”

9. In the old sense: “form,” “shape.”

Of his own words is staggered, wearily

He paused, and ere he could resume, I cried,  
“First who art thou?” . . . “Before thy memory

“I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did, and died,<sup>1</sup> 200  
And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit  
Earth had with purer nutriment supplied

“Corruption would not now thus much inherit  
Of what was once Rousseau — nor this disguise  
Stain that within which still disdains to wear it. — 205

“If I have been extinguished, yet there rise  
A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.”<sup>2</sup> —  
“And who are those chained to the car?” “The Wise,

“The great, the unforgotten: they who wore  
Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreathes of light,<sup>3</sup> 210  
Signs of thought’s empire over thought; their lore

“Taught them not this — to know themselves; their might  
Could not repress the mutiny within,  
And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night

“Caught them ere evening.” “Who is he with chin 215  
Upon his breast and hands crost on his chain?”  
“The Child of a fierce hour; he sought to win

“The world, and lost all it did contain  
Of greatness, in its hope destroyed; and more  
Of fame and peace than Virtue’s self can gain 220

1. I.e., Shelley could have no personal memory of Rousseau (1712–1778), because he had died before Shelley was born.

2. The sparks of Rousseau’s writings had kindled a thousand signal fires — including that of the French Revolution, of which one child was Napoleon, who is described in lines 215–27.

3. I.e., mitred churchmen, helmeted soldiers, crowned kings, and haloed sages. With line 208 Rousseau begins to identify some of the “mighty captives” whom the narrator had noted earlier.

“Without the opportunity which bore  
 Him on its eagle’s pinion to the peak  
 From which a thousand climbers have before

“Fall’n as Napoleon fell.” —I felt my cheek  
 Alter to see the great form pass away 225  
 Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak

That every pigmy kicked it as it lay—  
 And much I grieved to think how power and will  
 In opposition rule our mortal day—

And why God made irreconcilable 230  
 Good and the means of good;<sup>4</sup> and for despair  
 I half disdained mine eye’s desire to fill

With the spent vision of the times that were  
 And scarce have ceased to be . . . “Dost thou behold,”  
 Said then my guide, “those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire, 235

“Frederic, and Kant, Catherine, and Leopold,  
 Chained hoary anarchists, demagogue and sage<sup>5</sup>  
 Whose name the fresh world thinks already old—

“For in the battle Life and they did wage  
 She remained conqueror—I was overcome 240  
 By my own heart alone, which neither age

“Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb  
 Could temper to its object.”<sup>6</sup> —“Let them pass”—  
 I cried—“the world and its mysterious doom

4. I.e., the desire, as against the means, to do good.

5. Presumably Voltaire (the immensely influential thinker of the 18th-century Enlightenment) is the “demagogue.” Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Leopold II of the Holy Roman Empire, all influenced by Voltaire’s ideas, are the “anarchs” (leaders who bring about anarchy). Immanuel Kant (the great philosopher of the German Enlightenment) is the “sage.”

6. Rousseau was conquered by his own heart’s limitless desires, which no experience could moderate (“temper”) to be content with an achievable object.

“Is not so much more glorious than it was  
 That I desire to worship those who drew  
 New figures on its false and fragile glass 245

“As the old faded.” — “Figures ever new  
 Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;  
 We have but thrown, as those before us threw, 250

“Our shadows on it as it past away.  
 But mark, how chained to the triumphal chair  
 The mighty phantoms of an elder day —

“All that is mortal of great Plato there  
 Expiates the joy and woe his master knew not; 255  
 That star that ruled his doom was far too fair —

“And Life, where long that flower of Heaven grew not,  
 Conquered the heart by love which gold or pain  
 Or age or sloth or slavery could subdue not<sup>7</sup> —

“And near [him] walk the [Macedonian]<sup>8</sup> twain, 260  
 The tutor and his pupil,<sup>9</sup> whom Dominion  
 Followed as tame as vulture in a chain. —

“The world was darkened beneath either pinion  
 Of him whom from the flock of conquerors  
 Fame singled as her thunderbearing minion; 265

“The other long outlived both woes and wars,  
 Throned in new thoughts of men, and still had kept  
 The jealous keys of truth’s eternal doors

7. I.e., all of Plato except his immortal philosophy is expiating the passions of life that Socrates, “his master,” escaped but to which Plato succumbed because of his love for the boy Aster, who died young (line 257). The name “Aster” designates a flower but also means “star” in Greek—the two meanings are joined in the figure “flower of Heaven” (line 257). Aster is the subject of the epigram attributed to Plato that Shelley used as the motto for *Adonais*.

8. Conjectural words (bracketed) for blank spaces in the manuscript.

9. Aristotle and his pupil Alexander the Great of Macedonia, a kingdom north of Greece.

“If Bacon’s spirit [eagle]<sup>1</sup> had not leapt  
 Like lightning out of darkness; he compelled 270  
 The Proteus shape of Nature’s as it slept

“To wake and to unbar the caves that held  
 The treasure of the secrets of its reign<sup>2</sup> —  
 See the great bards of old who inly quelled

“The passions which they sung, as by their strain 275  
 May well be known: their living melody  
 Tempers its own contagion to the vein

“Of those who are infected with it<sup>3</sup> — I  
 Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!<sup>4</sup> —

“And so my words were seeds of misery — 280  
 Even as the deeds of others.” — “Not as theirs,”<sup>5</sup>  
 I said — he pointed to a company

In which I recognized amid the heirs  
 Of Cæsar’s crime from him to Constantine.<sup>6</sup>  
 The Anarchs old whose force and murderous snares 285

Had founded many a sceptre bearing line  
 And spread the plague of blood and gold abroad,  
 And Gregory and John<sup>7</sup> and men divine

1. The word is a conjectural.

2. Shelley represents Aristotle, because of the authority long exerted by his philosophy on subsequent thinkers, to have been no less a tyrant than Alexander; he would even now bar us from truth, had not Francis Bacon, the Renaissance thinker, reopened the way by his new method of scientific inquiry. “Proteus”: a sea god who could assume various shapes.

3. I.e., moderates the disease (of passion) with which it infects the veins of those who hear it.

4. I.e., Rousseau, unlike the classical poets (lines 274–75), had himself suffered the passions he expresses in his writings.

5. I.e., not the seeds of such misery as were the deeds of those men. “Theirs” refers to the evil “company,” to whom Rousseau has just pointed (line 282).

6. Caesar’s “crime” had been to destroy the Roman Republic and to become the first of a line of emperors, his “heirs” extending to Constantine, who established Christianity as the religion of Rome early in the 4th century.

7. Pope Gregory the Great established the independent political power of the papacy; “John” is a name frequently assumed by Popes.

Who rose like shadows between Man and god  
 Till that eclipse, still hanging under Heaven, 290  
 Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode

For the true Sun it quenched.<sup>8</sup> — “Their power was given  
 But to destroy,” replied the leader — “I  
 Am one of those who have created, even

“If it be but a world of agony.” — 295  
 “Whence camest thou and whither goest thou?  
 How did thy course begin,” I said, “and why?

“Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow  
 Of people, and my heart of one sad thought. —  
 Speak.”<sup>9</sup> “Whence I came, partly I seem to know, 300

“And how and by what paths I have been brought  
 To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;  
 Why this should be my mind can compass not;

“Whither the conqueror hurries me still less.  
 But follow thou, and from spectator turn 305  
 Actor or victim in this wretchedness,

“And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn  
 From thee. — Now listen . . . In the April prime<sup>1</sup>  
 When all the forest tops began to burn

“With kindling green, touched by the azure clime 310  
 Of the young year, I found myself asleep  
 Under a mountain, which from unknown time

8. I.e., institutional Christianity has eclipsed the true God.

9. The rest of the fragment consists of Rousseau's allegorical account of his own life, in response to the only two of the narrator's four questions (lines 296–97) which, he says, the limitations of his knowledge permit him in part to answer.

1. Spring, the first season of the year.

“Had yawned into a cavern high and deep  
 And from it came a gentle rivulet  
 Whose water like clear air in its calm sweep 315

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

“All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love,  
 Which they had known before that hour of rest: 320  
 A sleeping mother then would dream not of

“The only child who died upon her breast  
 At eventide, a king would mourn no more  
 The crown of which his brow was dispossesst

“When the sun lingered o’er the Ocean floor 325  
 To gild his rival’s new prosperity. —  
 Thou wouldst forget thus vainly to deplore

“Ills, which if ill, can find no cure from thee,  
 The thought of which no other sleep will quell  
 Nor other music blot from memory — 330

“So sweet and deep is the oblivious<sup>2</sup> spell. —  
 Whether my life had been before that sleep  
 The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell

“Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,  
 I know not. I arose and for a space 335  
 The scene of woods and waters seemed to keep,

2. Causing forgetfulness. Shelley models Rousseau’s account of his life in part on Rousseau’s own confessional writings and in part (as numerous verbal echoes indicate) on Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* and its account of the westward course of human life. Shelley, however, substitutes his own interpretations and evaluations for those expressed by Wordsworth.

“Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace  
 Of light diviner than the common Sun  
 Sheds on the common Earth, but all the place

“Was filled with many sounds woven into one 340  
 Oblivious melody, confusing sense  
 Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun;

“And as I looked the bright omnipresence  
 Of morning through the orient<sup>3</sup> cavern flowed,  
 And the Sun’s image radiantly intense 345

“Burned on the waters of the well that glowed  
 Like gold, and threaded all the forest maze  
 With winding paths of emerald fire — there stood

“Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze 350  
 Of his own glory, on the vibrating  
 Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,

“A shape all light,<sup>4</sup> which with one hand did fling  
 Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn  
 Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing

“A silver music on the mossy lawn, 355  
 And still before her on the dusky grass  
 Iris<sup>5</sup> her many coloured scarf had drawn. —

3. Facing the east. The cavern runs from east to west through the mountain, and as Rousseau grows older he follows the course of its rivulet westward.

4. The significance of the “shape all light” has been much debated. It seems at least in part to represent the Rousseauistic and Wordsworthian ideal of nature and of trust in the natural human instincts. The description of the shape echoes Wordsworth’s description, in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, of the celestial light, glory, and splendor that in his youth had invested the common earth. In Shelley’s poem, the enchanting feminine shape, formed by a reflection of the sun’s light from the material medium of water, apparently leads Rousseau on only to betray him (382ff., 400ff.).

5. Goddess of the rainbow.

“In her right hand she bore a chrystal glass  
 Mantling with bright Nepenthe;<sup>6</sup> — the fierce splendour  
 Fell from her as she moved under the mass 360

“Of the deep cavern, and with palms so tender  
 Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow,  
 Glided along the river, and did bend her

“Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow  
 Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream 365  
 That whispered with delight to be their pillow. —

“As one enamoured is upborne 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 370  
 The dancing foam, partly to glide along  
 The airs that roughened the moist amethyst,

“Or the slant morning beams that fell among  
 The trees, or the soft shadows of the trees;  
 And her feet ever to the ceaseless song 375

“Of leaves and winds and waves and birds and bees  
 And falling drops moved in a measure new  
 Yet sweet, as on the summer evening breeze

“Up from the lake a shape of golden dew  
 Between two rocks, athwart the rising moon, 380  
 Dances i’ the wind where eagle never flew. —

6. A drug causing total forgetfulness. The sinister suggestion subtly introduced in the description of the shape (“the fierce splendour”) is heightened by echoes from Milton’s *Comus*, lines 672ff., in which the enchanter Comus (born of Circe, “daughter of the Sun”) tries to seduce the Lady with a beverage that Milton compares to Nepenthe.

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

“All that was seemed as if it had been not, 385  
As if the gazer’s mind was strewn beneath  
Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

“Trampled its fires into the dust of death,  
As Day upon the threshold of the east  
Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath 390

“Of darkness reilluminates even the least  
Of heaven’s living eyes<sup>7</sup>—like day she came,  
Making the night a dream; and ere she ceased

“To move, as one between desire and shame  
Suspended, I said—‘If, as it doth seem, 395  
Thou comest from the realm without a name,

“‘Into this valley of perpetual dream,  
Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—  
Pass not away upon the passing stream.’

“‘Arise and quench thy thirst,’ was her reply. 400  
And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand  
Of dewy morning’s vital alchemy,

“I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,  
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,  
And suddenly my brain became as sand 405

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

7. The stars.

“Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore  
 Until the second bursts—so on my sight  
 Burst a new Vision never seen before.— 410

“And the fair shape waned in the coming light  
 As veil by veil the silent splendour drops  
 From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite<sup>8</sup>

“Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops— 415  
 And as the presence of that fairest planet  
 Although unseen is felt by one who hopes

“That his day’s path may end as he began it  
 In that star’s smile,<sup>9</sup> whose light is like the scent  
 Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it, 420

“Or the soft notes in which his dear lament  
 The Brescian shepherd breathes,<sup>1</sup> or the caress  
 That turned his weary slumber to content.—

“So knew I in that light’s severe excess  
 The presence of that shape which on the stream 425  
 Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,

“More dimly than a day appearing dream,  
 The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep,  
 A light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam

“Through the sick day in which we wake to weep 430  
 Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.—  
 So did that shape its obscure tenour keep

8. A greenish gem.

9. The star that is both the morning star, Lucifer (line 414), and the evening star, Venus.

1. “The favorite song, *Stanco di pascolar le pecorelle*, is a Brescian national air” [Mary Shelley’s note]. The title translates, “I am tired of pasturing the sheep.” Brescia is a province in northern Italy.

“Beside my path, as silent as a ghost;<sup>2</sup>  
 But the new Vision, and its cold bright car,  
 With savage music, stunning music, crost 435

“The forest, and as if from some dread war  
 Triumphantly returning, the loud million  
 Fiercely extolled the fortune of her star. —

“A moving arch of victory the vermilion  
 And green and azure plumes of Iris had 440  
 Built high over her wind-winged pavilion,

“And underneath ætherial glory clad  
 The wilderness, and far before her flew  
 The tempest of the splendour which forbade

“Shadow to fall from leaf or stone; — the crew 445  
 Seemed in that light like atomies<sup>3</sup> that dance  
 Within a sunbeam. — Some upon the new

“Embroidery of flowers that did enhance  
 The grassy vesture of the desert, played,  
 Forgetful of the chariot’s swift advance; 450

“Others stood gazing till within the shade  
 Of the great mountain its light left them dim. —  
 Others outsped it, and others made

“Circles around it like the clouds that swim  
 Round the high moon in a bright sea of air, 455  
 And more did follow, with exulting hymn,

2. In lines 410–33 the brilliance of the chariot of Life makes the fair shape fade until, like the morning star, Lucifer (line 414) in the daytime, its presence is felt but no longer seen.

3. Particles of dust.

“The chariot and the captives fettered there,  
 But all like bubbles on an eddying flood  
 Fell into the same track at last and were

“Borne onward. — I among the multitude  
 Was swept; me sweetest flowers delayed not long,  
 Me not the shadow nor the solitude, 460

“Me not the falling stream’s Lethean<sup>4</sup> song,  
 Me, not the phantom of that early form  
 Which moved upon its motion, — but among 465

“The thickest billows of the living storm  
 I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime  
 Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform. —

“Before the chariot had begun to climb  
 The opposing steep of that mysterious dell, 470  
 Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme

“Of him<sup>5</sup> who from the lowest depths of Hell  
 Through every Paradise and through all glory  
 Love led serene, and who returned to tell

“In words of hate and awe the wondrous story 475  
 How all things are transfigured, except Love;  
 For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes hoary

“The world can hear not the sweet notes that move  
 The sphere whose light is melody to lovers<sup>6</sup> —  
 A wonder worthy of his rhyme — the grove 480

4. Causing forgetfulness, like the river Lethe in Hades.

5. Dante, who describes this pilgrimage in *The Divine Comedy*; “Love” (line 474) is embodied in that poem by Beatrice.

6. The third sphere of the planet Venus (Love), in Dante’s Ptolemaic universe.

“Grew dense with shadows to its inmost covers,  
 The earth was grey with phantoms,<sup>7</sup> and the air  
 Was peopled with dim forms, as when there hovers

“A flock of vampire-bats before the glare  
 Of the tropic sun, bringing ere evening 485  
 Strange night upon some Indian isle,— thus were

“Phantoms diffused around, and some did fling  
 Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves,  
 Behind them, some like eaglets on the wing

“Were lost in the white blaze, others like elves 490  
 Danced in a thousand unimagined shapes  
 Upon the sunny streams and grassy shelves;

“And others sate chattering like restless apes  
 On vulgar paws and voluble like fire.  
 Some made a cradle of the ermined capes 495

“Of kingly mantles, some upon the tiar  
 Of pontiffs<sup>8</sup> sate like vultures, others played  
 Within the crown which girt with empire

“A baby’s or an idiot’s brow, and made  
 Their nests in it; the old anatomies<sup>9</sup> 500  
 Sate hatching their bare brood under the shade

“Of demon wings, and laughed from their dead eyes  
 To reassume the delegated power  
 Arrayed in which these worms did monarchize

7. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, book 4, says that ideas, superstitions, and passions peel off of humans as *simulacra* (semblances, phantoms) and float about in space.

8. The tiara, or triple crown, of the popes.

9. Skeletonlike monsters.

“Who make this earth their charnel.<sup>1</sup>—Others more  
 Humble, like falcons sate upon the fist  
 Of common men, and round their heads did soar,

505

“Or like small gnats and flies, as thick as mist  
 On evening marshes, thronged about the brow  
 Of lawyer, statesman, priest and theorist,

510

“And others like discoloured flakes of snow  
 On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair  
 Fell, and were melted by the youthful glow

“Which they extinguished; for like tears, they were  
 A veil to those from whose faint lids they rained  
 In drops of sorrow.—I became aware

515

“Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained  
 The track in which we moved; after brief space  
 From every form the beauty slowly waned,

“From every firmest limb and fairest face  
 The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left  
 The action and the shape without the grace

520

“Of life; the marble brow of youth was cleft  
 With care, and in the eyes where once hope shone  
 Desire like a lioness bereft

525

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

“In Autumn evening from a poplar tree—  
 Each, like himself and like each other were,  
 At first, but soon distorted, seemed to be

530

1. The monarchs who had made the earth one great cemetery (“charnel”) were like grave worms, for they fed on the corpses they had slaughtered.

“Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air;  
 And of this stuff the car’s creative ray  
 Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there

“As the sun shapes the clouds<sup>2</sup> — thus, on the way 535  
 Mask after mask fell from the countenance  
 And form of all, and long before the day

“Was old, the joy which waked like Heaven’s glance  
 The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died,  
 And some grew weary of the ghastly dance 540

“And fell, as I have fallen by the way side,  
 Those soonest from whose forms most shadows past  
 And least of strength and beauty did abide.” —

“Then, what is Life?” I said . . . the cripple cast  
 His eye upon the car which now had rolled 545  
 Onward, as if that look must be the last,

And answered. . . . “Happy those for whom the fold  
 Of

1822

1824

2. The shadows and phantoms of lines 480ff. originate (lines 516ff.) in the qualities of beauty, strength, and freshness, which fall like masks away from the men and women in the procession, as their hope degenerates into mere desire. These shadows of lost physical qualities at first (line 530) resembled the person from whom they originated, and the other shadows from that person; but they were distorted by the currents of the air and miscreated into phantoms by the light from the car of Life (lines 531–35).