Song of Apollo

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Song of Apollo

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,
Tell 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
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
   Fly² 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
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 Timolus, 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\(^3\) 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; 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?

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 Victory and praise, in its own right, belong.

To Jane. The Invitation\(^1\)

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 In its cradle on the brake.\(^2\)— The brightest hour of unborn spring Through the winter wandering Found, it seems, this halcyon\(^3\) morn To hoar February born;

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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

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,
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.

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
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—
“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,
You, tiresome verse-reciter Care,
I will pay you in the grave,
Death will listen to your stave†—
Expectation too, be off!
To-day is for itself enough—
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
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
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
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
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
Billows murmur at our feet
Where the earth and ocean meet,
And all things seem only one
In the universal Sun.—

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
The Triumph of Life

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

Of light, the Ocean’s orison¹ 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 orient² incense lit by the new ray

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

    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

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

Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep

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.
The Triumph of Life

Of a green Apennine:¹ 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

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

That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,
Bathed in the same cold dew my brow and hair
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. . . .

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
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

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¹. The Apennines are a chain of mountains extending down the peninsula of Italy.
². 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,

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 it⁶ as it were a ghost,
Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.

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

Upon that path where flowers never grew;
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

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
When the South wind shakes the extinguished day.—

⁶. i.e., from their own shadow (“death”).
The Triumph of Life

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

When on the sunlit limits of the night
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,

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

Was bent, a dun and faint ethereal gloom
Tempering the light; upon the chariot’s beam
A Janus-visaged Shadow did assume

The guidance of that wonder-winged team.

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

Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,
    Nor then avail the beams that quench the Sun
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
    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
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

    Had bound a yoke which soon they stooped to bear.³
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
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.
The Triumph of Life

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
Till the great winter lay the form and name
Of their own earth with them forever low

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

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

Were there; for they of Athens and Jerusalem
Were neither mid the mighty captives seen
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
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

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

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
   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,

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 desart shore.—Behind,
Old men, and women foully disarrayed
   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
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.\(^7\)  

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
(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
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,”\(^8\)
Said the grim Feature,\(^9\) of my thought aware,

“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
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, 1
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.—

   “If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.” 2—
   “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, 3
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
   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

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 Rev-
   olution, 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
   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
Good and the means of good;\(^4\) 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,

   “Frederic, and Kant, Catherine, and Leopold,
Chained hoary anarchists, demagogue and sage\(^5\)
   Whose name the fresh world thinks already old—

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

   “Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb
Could temper to its object.”\(^6\) —“Let them pass”—
   I cried—“the world and its mysterious doom

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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). Immanual 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

“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,

“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;
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?—

“And near [him] walk the [Macedonian] twain,
The tutor and his pupil, 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;

“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.
The triumph of life

“If Bacon’s spirit [eagle] had not leapt
   Like lightning out of darkness; he compelled
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—
   See the great bards of old who inly quelled

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

“Of those who are infected with it—I
Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!—

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

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

   Had founded many a sceptre bearing line
And spread the plague of blood and gold abroad,
   And Gregory and John 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. Cæsar’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.\textsuperscript{5}—“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.” —
“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.”\textsuperscript{9} “Whence I came, partly I seem to know,

“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
Actor or victim in this wretchedness,

“And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn
From thee.—Now listen . . . In the April prime\textsuperscript{1}
When all the forest tops began to burn

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

\textsuperscript{5} I.e., institutional Christianity has eclipsed the true God.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{1} Spring, the first season of the year.
The Triumph of Life

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

   “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:
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 dispossest

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

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

“So sweet and deep is the oblivious 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
   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
Oblivious melody, confusing sense
   Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun;

“And as I looked the bright omnipresence
   Of morning through the orient’s 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 maze
   With winding paths of emerald fire—there stood

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

   A shape all light, 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,
   And still before her on the dusky grass
Iris’s 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;6—the fierce splendour
Fell from her as she moved under the mass

“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
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
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

“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,
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,
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

“Of darkness reillumines even the least
Of heaven’s living eyes—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,
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.
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

“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. —

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

“Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops—
   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, whose light is like the scent
   Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,

“Or the soft notes in which his dear lament
   The Brescian shepherd breathes, 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
   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
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;  
But the new Vision, and its cold bright car,  
With savage music, stunning music, crost  

“The forest, and as if from some dread war  
Triumphantly returning, 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  
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  
Seemed in that light like atomies  that dance  
Within a sunbeam. — Some upon the new  

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

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

“Circles around it like the clouds that swim  
Round the high moon in a bright sea of air,  
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 Triumph of Life

“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,

   “Me not the falling stream’s Lethean⁴ song,
   Me, not the phantom of that early form
Which moved upon its motion,—but among

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

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

   “Of him⁵ 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
   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 lovers⁶—
   A wonder worthy of his rhyme—the grove

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, 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
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
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

“Of kingly mantles, some upon the tiar
Of pontiffs 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
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.
THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE

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

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

“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

“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

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

“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

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—thus, on the way
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

“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.”—

“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
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).