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‘Lines of Light’:

Reading Poetic Variations of Light in Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley

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Abstract: Recognising the importance of Wordsworth’s sense of nascent light (elegised for in his ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’), the essay traces how influential this idea was on later Romantic poetic treatments of light. Wordsworth’s qualitative distinction between the ‘fountain light of all our day’ and the ‘light of common day’ reveals his alertness to the revelatory and blinding effects of light and establishes the terms of Byron’s and Shelley’s imaginative engagement with the transformative aspects of light in their depiction of Italian cityscapes and coastal scenes. This transformative quality of light, for Byron and Shelley, is inextricable from those utopian aspirations to recapture future edenic states, which are configured in terms that consign such future idylls to the irrecoverable past. Finally, Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* is read as avowing an apocalyptic, rather than transformative, light whose ‘severe excess’ is still reimagined in terms familiar to the reader of Wordsworth’s ‘Ode’.

Light is the source of illumination and the medium of vision (both physical sight and revelatory insight). But light can also be so dazzlingly bright that what otherwise might have been clearly seen is obscured from our physical or visionary sight and comprehension. Light as both a medium and poetic symbol points up its ambivalent capacity to reveal and to conceal; acting as a benevolent guiding star amidst darkness,

in one instance, and a treacherous will-o'-the-wisp the next. Light has the power to illumine and intensify the surrounding darkness, as well as the eerie capacity to transform the beautiful into the garishly horrific.

The transitional and transformative light of an elfin twilight can enchant as much as it instils terror.¹ Light after all is not only a source of radiance, but the origin of shade and shadows. Shelley captures the coalescence of this shadow play of light and dark when he describes the nourishment of poetic thought 'Like darkness to a dying flame' and, similarly, so does Byron's narrator of *Don Juan* when he wittily comments on Rembrandt's ability to make Claude Lorraine's 'darkness equal light'.² Wordsworth before them was equally alert to this curious symbiosis between illumination and darkness when he captures those 'interminglings mild / Of light with shade'.³ These various and variable effects of light in the poetry of Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley are cast as paradoxical, though not mutually exclusive, sources of nourishment and destruction.

I Nascent Light: Wordsworth

The elegiac tone of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' recollects a state of nurturing infancy in which 'every common sight' seemed 'Apparalled in celestial light'⁴ only to recognise that, through the encroachment of age and the 'Shades of the prison-house' (67), such a sustaining spiritual light gives sway to 'the light of common day' (76). This fall from 'celestial' grace, in Wordsworth's poetic spiritual autobiography, is registered as a temporal fall from infancy into adulthood, as well as a fall from transcendent vision into ordinary sight. Such a spiritual and psychological shift in perspective is tracked by a marked change in the quality of light which

reduces an all-expansive glorious light to an irretrievable 'visionary gleam' (56):
'vision splendid' becomes vision lost and, through a verbal reversal, the blessed light that once illuminated 'every common sight' is obliterated into the qualitatively different and quotidian 'light of common day.'

In the Ode's Neo-platonic terms, all that is left to us in our fallen condition are 'those shadowy recollections' (151) of what had once been 'the fountain light of all our day' (153) and the 'master light of all our seeing' (154). Such faint remnants of a 'radiance which once was so bright' (178), for Wordsworth, ought not to be a cause of grief for the 'philosophic mind' (189) and instead become a source of 'Strength in what remains behind' (183). What 'remains behind', like the 'sobering colouring' of 'the setting sun' (199-200) or the 'innocent brightness of a new-born Day' (198), may intimate our mortality, but they are also – as our residual sense of 'primal sympathy' (183) – intimations of immortality through their own loveliness and dim relation to that 'celestial light' and the transcendent force from which it emanates. Paradoxically, such intimations of immortality originate in the breast of 'human suffering' (187) and the Ode's final consolatory vision of 'those thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears' (207) is awakened by the 'meanest flower' (206). Like those residual 'shadowy recollections' of 'celestial light', the profundity of such grief-stricken thoughts, Wordsworth's lines imply, are 'often' but not always entirely beyond outward show or sign.

II Transformative Light: Byron and Shelley

This ambivalent relationship between Wordsworth's visionary 'celestial light' and the imprisoning 'light of common day', between the kaleidoscopic variations of light and

shade, is integral to the *chiaroscuro* effects of Byron's and Shelley's poetry. For both poets, light is transformative. On the one hand, light transforms the universe for the better and, on the other, throws into relief a darker, shadowy, sense of self and world. These transformative and ambivalent qualities of light are invariably most acute in the liminal spatial, temporal, and psychic zones demarcated by what has recently been described as the Romantic 'invention of evening'⁵ (or twilight) as a poetic topos. That these twilit scenes commingle opposing moods and modes of being are underscored, for Byron and Shelley, by the explicitly geographic (often Italian⁶) coastal locations they occupy, marginally positioned on those borderlines between land and sea.

Byron re-imagines Wordsworth's semi-spiritual autobiography of a fall of selfhood from 'celestial light' into the 'light of common day' as the historical decline of political ideals and a fall of nationhood. Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* meditates on the fortunes and misfortunes of the 'lords of earth and sea' (xxv. 225) of Rome and Venice in particular and, more generally, on the rise and fall of Italian history and culture:

The commonwealth of kings, the men of Rome!
And even since, and now, fair Italy!
Thou art the garden of the world, the home
Of all Art yields, and Nature can decree;
Even in thy desert, what is like to thee?
Thy very weeds are beautiful, thy waste
More rich than other climes' fertility;

Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced

With an immaculate charm which can not be defaced. (IV. xxvi. 226-34)

Recalling mankind's fall in Eden, Byron finds in Roman and Venetian decline an oxymoronic 'ruined grace' and remnants of a 'glory' in the 'wreck' of this civilisation. That the light of such residual 'glory' still haunts the 'immaculate charm' of present-day Italy captures something of the state, in the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', of being 'Not in entire forgetfulness' (62) of former better days, as well as the sense that Italy as a fallen nation, like the Wordsworthian self dispossessed of heaven, is 'trailing clouds of glory' (64).

These 'trailing clouds' of Italy's former 'glory' are emphasised by Byron's second line, which qualifies the present of 'now' with the past of 'ever since' to imply the passage of time. Echoing the opening insistence in Wordsworth's Ode that 'There was a time' (1), Byron's qualification of the present militates against the later insistence that 'fair Italy!' was (and remains) an edenic place of unprecedented natural beauty and cultural flourishing as 'the garden of the world, the home / Of all Art yields'. For all that these lines resist a temporal signalling of the fallen state of Italy, Byron's poetry recognises, as does Wordsworth's Ode, that such a time is past. That Byron's choice of 'graced' suggestively forms the final couplet with the end rhyme of 'defaced' brings to the listener's ear the word 'disgraced', the very word which has been refused utterance throughout the rest of the stanza. The repressed, but resonantly implied, word 'disgraced' registers painfully, on a historical level, Italy's political and cultural decline and, on a personal level, Byron's own scandalous fall from social grace in England.

No less darkly, but with added comic mockery, Byron's call for indiscrete discretion over an omitted name, in a footnote to 'Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn' – printed in *Hours of Idleness* (1807) – expresses an attendant anxiety that 'the gentle, or ferocious reader [may] fill up the blank as he [or she] pleases' (fn. 18).⁷

Characteristically, Byron elsewhere turns the dangerous possibility of these verbal blanks to his own advantage to render the reader complicit in the struggle of textual composition. Commenting, for instance, on a period of unknown months in the unfolding story of Don Juan and Julia, the narrator-poet wryly remarks in an aside that such ignorance on his part might mark 'the fatal day, / Without those epoch my poetic skill / For want of facts would all be thrown away' (*Don Juan*, I. cxxi. 962-4) before inviting the reader to imagine the time lapsed, which the narrator cannot or will not shed light upon.

Encouraging readers to fill in these shadowy blanks – or read between the lines of a work – is a double-edged strategy and runs the risk of inviting readers to make less favourable surmises about the words that Byron wrote and the life behind them. For Byron, this concern is vital as we have already seen, to his depiction of the ruins of ancient civilisations and centres on how his own poetry and personal history will be read and whether present and future readers of his work can be persuaded – or hoodwinked – into reading favourably in a certain slant of light his life and writing.

These anxieties abound. In Stanza xxvi of *Childe Harold* Canto IV, Byron's narrator testifies to, and seeks to preserve, the unique cultural and historical achievements of Italy's glorious past, but also recognises that the preservation of Italy's rare beauty is

only possible through a strong reading (or misreading) of her past and present moments averred by Byron's poetic fiction. A fiction, which itself, admits the debilitating effects of time through those oxymoronic pronouncements that declare Italy's 'wreck a glory' and her present state a 'ruin graced'. These contradictory formulations both recall earlier in *Canto IV* of *Childe Harold*, the narrator's sense of his own fragmented subjectivity as 'a ruin amidst ruins' (xxv. 219), and Manfred's youthful recollection of the moonlight coliseum as 'a ruinous perfection' (*Manfred*, III. iv. 28).

Byron's Venice intensifies the reader's sense of the city as a product of commingled light and water and a site of both the literary imagination and mythology that melts into the actuality of the city's architectural and institutional structures. Venice's immediate dark present is one which runs the risk, as does the bloody past of the Roman Coliseum, of exposure in the glaring 'brightness of the day' (*CH. IV. cxliii. 1286*). What Byron imaginatively emphasises as a serenely 'tender' quality of light is markedly different from that of the cold 'glare' (*CH. IV. cxliv. 2194*) of day that threatens to expose the ugly political realities behind the physical ruins of a fallen Rome and Venice. In *Childe Harold* the architectural beauty of the Roman circus, as in Manfred's nocturnal reminiscence of 'tender light' (*Manfred*, III. iv. 32), takes on a sublimity through, and in, the transformative 'light...serene' of the 'rising moon' to recapture the noble vestiges of its past 'magic circle' (*CH. IV. 144. 1287; 2194-5*).⁸

These fairer aspects of recollected civilizations or personages are often, for Byron, made visible when glimpsed through a nocturnal 'tender light'. The poetic quality of such a 'tender light' (*Manfred*, III. iv. 32) resists, as Byron feared elsewhere, an

unkind and negative ‘despairing light’ (‘Darkness’, 22) equated with a Miltonic ‘darkness made visible’.⁹ In ‘She Walks in Beauty’ it is just such a heavenly ‘tender light’ (*Manfred*, III. iv. 32) which, striking an optical and metrical equilibrium between ‘One shade the more, one ray the less’ (7), embodies and illumines the female’s visage whose ‘aspect’ is ‘best of dark and bright’ (3-4). Inward and outward states coalesce as Byron interweaves ‘nameless grace’ within her ‘every raven tress’ and her eyes are inseparable (woven through the alternate couplet rhyme) with the celestial heavens ‘Of cloudless climes and starry skies’ (2). Her inward serenity, calmness, and eloquence are at once emanating sources of, and illuminated by, those rays which ‘softly lightens o’er her face’ (10). These illuminating rays transform the physical body of an earthbound mortal into an eternal spiritual ‘nameless grace’ (8) and the boundless infinity of the night sky.

The source and effects of one such transformative and spiritualising ray of light are traced in Byron’s mindscape of Venice when he acknowledges that ‘The beings of the mind are not of clay; / Essentially immortal, they create / And multiply in us a brighter ray’ (*CH. IV. v. 37-9*). The female figure of ‘She Walks in Beauty’ is one of these higher ‘beings’ transfigured by those rays, which emanate from within and illuminate her from without. Curiously, Byron’s transfiguration of her into a heavenly form and the celestial heavens themselves remains firmly rooted in the flesh that it seeks to transcend.¹⁰ Similarly, in a later stanza in *Canto IV* of *Childe Harold* Venice’s watery environs, transformed by a twilit spectrum of that ‘magical variety diffuse’, both transform and reflect the evening sky:

Fill’d with the face of heaven, which, from afar,

Comes down upon the waters; all its hues,
From the rich sunset to the rising star,
Their magical variety diffuse:
And now they change; a paler shadow strews
Its mantle o'er the mountains; parting day
Dies like the dolphin, whom each pang imbues
With a new colour as it gasps away,
The last still loveliest, till — 'tis gone — and all is grey. (xxix. 253-61)

Byron's extended simile, describing the last light of day, blends myth and actuality with its evocation of the physical dying presence of the dolphin, prized for its iridescent appearance, immortalised as the constellation Delphinus, and aligned through mythology with poetic art as one of the forms taken by Apollo (god of light and poetry). Earlier, in Canto I, Byron had more explicitly mourned the absence of Apollo recognising, though not entirely without hope, that 'no more Apollo haunts his grot / And thou, the Muse's seat, art now their grave / Some gentle Spirit still pervades the spot' (*CH. i.* 634-6). In Byron's later lines, the imagery of spent evening light invites a momentary mythic delight as they recognise the loss ('tis gone') of past ambrosial states. Like the expiring 'new colour' of 'dolphin' and day, such 'loveliest' of Hesperidean bliss are lost to us in an irrecoverable but, reminiscent of the benign pervasive 'Spirit', lingering past.

A degenerating and fleetingly revived Italy, for Byron, is discovered amidst its fallen heroes and ruined architectural structures, 'whose ashes slept sublime // Buried in air, the deep blue sky of Rome, / And looking to the stars' (*CH. IV.* cx-cxi 990-2).

Paradoxically, Rome's past is incarcerated in the cerulean blue dome of 'air' gazing skyward to the stars as spent, though burning beacons, of a future already past.

Shelley may have had these lines in mind when he claims of Adonais that 'the vault of blue Italian day / Is yet his fitting charnel-roof' (*Adonais*, 59-60). But this image from Shelley's elegy is equally a reimagining of his own earlier one of 'death's blue vault' reflected in the 'black and watery depth' (215-16), which marks out the tragic trajectory of the romance quest of *Alastor*.

If Byron's reading of nationhood is ultimately a recommended reading of his own poetic selfhood, then, behind Shelley's poetic romance quests unfurls another unique psychodrama of its own. Byron and Shelley were drawn to the unique quality of light afforded by Italian twilights and found in them, to varying degrees, an imaginative source of potential transformation at the level of both selfhood and nationhood.

Unlike Byron, whose poetic eye turns to an open expanse of 'azure air' (*CH. IV. xxvii. 243*), Shelley has an eye for the infernal and pestilent quality of Venetian light that sets her lagoon as 'Dissolved into one lake of fire' (*Julian and Maddalo*, 81). Shelley's eye, like Byron's own, was also drawn to the spectacular 'magical variety diffuse' of the shifting colours of Italianate light, which melts from azure day to 'purple night' ('Lines written in the Bay of Lerici', 12).

In 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici', Shelley holds out imaginatively, against mounting despair, for the remote paradisaal prospect of 'some Elysian star' (42). The unfolding tragic celestial drama of this late lyric by Shelley recalls the cosmic drama set in motion by *Epipsychidion*. Abandoned by the 'One' – symbolising here Jane Williams – who could rival the moon as 'Bright wanderer' and 'fair coquette of

Heaven' (1), the forlorn speaker of 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici' is haunted by a series of visual and aural 'echoes' (20) of the one's absented presence.

This scene of a poet-speaker bereft by a once bright visionary female figure is typically Shelleyan and finds ready parallels within the psychodramas of *Epipsychidion* and *Alastor*. In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley both allegorises Emilia Viviani as Emily and spiritualises her materiality by depicting 'the brightness / Of her divinest presence [which] trembles through / Her limbs' to realise a coalescence of incorporeal spirit and physical embodiment. Anticipating the fled presence of the 'One fair' as the 'Bright wanderer' ('Bay of Lerici', 6, 1), Emily's 'divinest presence' is barely traceable 'Amid the splendour winged-stars' and the profundity of her protean form 'too deep / For the brief fathom-line of thought or sense' (*Epipsychidion*, 81, 89-90). Shelley's contradictory sense of Emily's ever-shifting presence as a 'motion which may change but cannot die' (*Epipsychidion*, 114) recalls an earlier account of the poet-figure's visionary 'bright silver dream' (67) and, subsequently, disturbing lost vision of the 'veiled maid' (50) in *Alastor*.

Habitually, 'bright' dreams or visionary presences, for Shelley, quickly give way to the antithesis of an unsettling shade or shadow. Both operating within and reimagining the poetic imagery of *Alastor*, Shelley compares the initial encounter, in *Epipsychidion*, with the elusive, ever-changing, diffuse, and ever-present Emily as an alluring yet potentially treacherous 'shadow of some golden dream' (116). As with the contradictory visionary 'fleeting shade' (206) of *Alastor*, Shelley's enticingly 'bright' visionary female figures remain forever elusive and refuse to be adequately defined in language or fixed in the present.¹¹

Similarly, then, it is only by an act of hopeful imaginative projection, in ‘Lines written in the Bay of Lerici’, that Shelley’s paradise of ‘some Elysian star’ might be regained in a future time. Such a future return to the possibility of a prelapsarian bliss may promise to reunite Shelley’s questing poet-speaker with the lost visionary female form, but whether the psychic and imaginative schism that her absence inflicts can be fully healed remains uncertain. The metaphorical voyage towards the improbable ‘Elysian star’ both acts as a curative – for Shelley’s mariner-like thoughts ‘sailed for drink to medicine’ – and a stinging reminder of the ‘sweet and bitter pain’ (43, 44) from which relief is sought.

A mixture of failed utopian aspiration, of personal and historical loss, infuses Shelley’s description of a fallen Rome, in *Adonais*, as ‘at once the Paradise / The grave, the city, and the wilderness’ (433-5). Paradoxically, any mythological version of Italy as restored to her former power and glory (symbolised through a resuscitated Venice or Rome) depends upon a recognition of her fallen state. Byron and Shelley knew that a myth of Italy’s lost utopia afforded, at its best, a still wished for and momentary paradise. For all those historical and personal ‘griefs’, as Byron writes in *Childe Harold* Canto IV, ‘subdued / There comes a token like a scorpion’s sting, / Scarce seen, but with fresh bitterness imbued’ (xxiii, 1-2). Here the simile of the scorpion re-imagines Byron’s earlier ruminations on the writhing ‘mind Remorse hath riven’ (435) which, in *The Giaour* (1813), is twice likened to a ‘Scorpion girt by fire’ (423, 434). Authors and readers alike, in Byron’s view, are reminded all too easily – by a chance ‘tone of music’ or ‘summer’s eve—or spring, / A flower—the wind—[or]

the ocean' (xxiii. 205-6) – of the historical and personal realities to which 'we are darkly bound' (xxii. 207).

If Shelley's 'Elysian star' serves as a beacon at all, in 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici', it is one that might either light our way or turn out to be a perilously misleading will-o'-the-wisp. The treachery of this celestial light is implied through Shelley's closing image of those foolish 'fish who came / To worship the delusive flame' of 'the fisher with his lamp / And spear' (53-4; 51-2). Psychic or political utopian states cannot be so easily realised, for Shelley, as a guiding beacon can readily become a treacherous *ignis fatuus*; a bright vision transformed into its own tragic shadowy counterpart; a paradise equally regained as already lost.

When Shelley envisages, towards the close of *Epipsychidion*, a temporally and elementally fragile paradisaic 'isle 'twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea' (456), his lines resonate with Byron's own imaginings of a recoverable utopia 'Buried in air, the deep blue sky of Rome' (*CH. IV. cxi*, 991). To such an 'isle under Ionian skies' Shelley entreats Emily to elope even in the full knowledge that this promised utopia is as 'Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise' (422-3). Echoing Byron's sense of a fallen Italy as 'Thy wreck a glory' (*CH. IV. xxvi*. 233), Shelley's imagery appreciates the tragic and blissful beauty of this 'wreck of Paradise' along with the imaginative, as well as spiritual, possibilities that such a 'Paradise' might afford even as it recognises the inevitable tragedy that would ensue from reclaiming such a utopian isle. In Wordsworth's terms, to reclaim 'Paradise' in a future moment is only ever to affirm that the 'visionary gleam' is 'fled' ('Ode', 56) and a hoped for Eden as the site of its own past spiritual ruin and wasteland.

III Apocalyptic Light: Shelley

The apocalyptic light central to Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, which also cast in the stanzaic form of *terza rima*, is distinctly indebted to the Italian influences of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Petrarch's *Trionfo d'Amore*.¹² Composed at the Villa Magni, not far from San Terenzo by the Bay of Lerici, Shelley's unfinished *The Triumph of Life* abandons the blurred lines and boundaries of twilight coastal scenes in favour of a more abstracted sense of temporal and spatial confusion. From the outset, Shelley's dreamer-poet, who is subjected to a 'waking dream' (42), hovers between conscious and unconscious modes of thought and is temporally and spatially suspended between the 'cone of night' and 'the freshness of that dawn' (22, 34). This seemingly benign and celestial 'birth / Of light' (6-7) promises new life and 'transparent' (31) vision. Simultaneously, this 'birth of light' gives rise to the dreamer-poet's 'strange trance' (29) and the 'strange distortion' (183), which transpires to be the figure of Rousseau irrecoverably disturbed by his own encounter with a visionary light.¹³

The preoccupation of Shelley's final poem with the ambivalently hopeful yet tragic symbolism of light owes as much to Dante and Petrarch as it does to the temporal and spiritual (event at moments, existential) journey of the self traced in Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'. Shelley's grief-stricken Rousseau provides a tragic retrospective on the latter's career and quest for philosophical enlightenment which depicts, as does Wordsworth, a journey away from the brilliance of 'celestial light' towards the mundane 'light of common day' ('Ode', 2; 4, 76); a career that begins with the promise of uncertain vision and ends with its apparent loss in the 'orient cavern' (*Triumph*, 344). Like the trajectory of Wordsworth's 'Ode', Rousseau's

youthful encounter with, and vision of, a 'shape all light' (*Triumph*, 353) treacherously abandons him to a present haunted by 'The ghost of a forgotten form' (*Triumph*, 428) and the garish light of 'the sick day in which we wake to weep' (*Triumph*, 430).¹⁴ This 'light's severe excess' (425) is rendered by Shelley, in deliberately Wordsworthian vein, as a heavenly 'half-extinguished beam' (429) whose presence 'Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost' (431) in this wakeful 'harsh world' (334).¹⁵

Recalling the many tragically failed quests of Shelley's visionary poet-figures, Rousseau's abandonment by a bright vision of youth causes him to embark upon a fraught venture to track 'glimmers' of the 'fair shape' (412) in the harsh reality of the waking world. Rousseau's revelatory moment in the 'deep cavern' (361) is equally one of lost vision and tragic loss. The youthful promise and tragic realisation of Rousseau's experience is pointed up again by Shelley's deliberate allusions to the poetic imagery of Wordsworth's 'Ode'. Shelley frames Rousseau's elegiac regret for a fled vision as akin to Wordsworth's own. Tellingly, Shelley's description of the birth of Rousseau's 'shape all light' from 'the bright omnipresence / of morning', which 'Burned upon the waters of the well' (*Triumph*, 343, 346), is infused with those 'Waters on a starry night' and the sunshine's 'glorious birth' that chart Wordsworth's own mourning for the passing of 'a glory from the earth' ('Ode', 14, 16, 18).¹⁶

That Shelley invites parallels between the figure of Rousseau and Wordsworth, as well as the poetic diction of *The Triumph of Life* and Wordsworth's 'Ode', is testament to Shelley's desire to draw out the scepticism within Wordsworth's poetry and the level of his depth of engagement with Wordsworthian poetics.¹⁷ If Rousseau's

encounter with 'the shape all light' offers any form of enlightenment, it is not, ironically, through her revelatory incandescence, after all she is 'As Day upon the threshold of the east' and capable of a darkness which 'reilluminates even the least / of heaven's living eyes' (*Triumph*, 389, 391-2). This action of re-illumination operates through intense contrast rather than actual nourishment and can be compared with, as Shelley writes in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', the effect of 'darkness to a dying flame' (45).¹⁸ Even at its most intense, Rousseau's 'bright omnipresence' of vision is one of destructive apocalypse that made 'All that was seemed as if it had been not' (385) through its extinguishing of 'the lamps of night' and the 'embers' of the 'gazer's mind' by trampling out each 'thought by thought' (*Triumph*, 390, 386-7).

By implication, Rousseau's 'shape all light' is the product of his own wilful desire to order, according to an abstract and unifying ideal, the chaos of life. A will towards an overly rationalised and ordered understanding of reality results in the self-destruction of Rousseau's mind 'thought by thought'. Rousseau is both the origin of his own bright vision and its destructive, dark, counterpart. That Shelley holds Rousseau accountable for the traitorous presence of the 'shape all light' is evident in the description of her sensual 'fair shape' as 'one between desire and shame / Suspended' (394-5). The suspension of her shape 'between desire and shame' hints that Rousseau's vision is a self-projected figure of his own troubled psychological condition.¹⁹ Just as the 'shape all light', which 'with one hand did fling / Dew on the earth' (351-2), transforms into its own dark counterpart of those 'Phantoms diffused around, [which]... some did fling / Shadows of shadows' (487-8), Rousseau's will to truth and journey towards self knowledge becomes a self-perpetuated tragedy of wilful self-obsession and self-deceit.

Rousseau's tragic introspection finds an affinity with Shelley's other questing visionary figures in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*. Rousseau's elegiac voice speaks, whether consciously or not, from the umbra of the 'shadow of some golden dream' (*Epipsychidion*, 115) of his own self-deception and irrecoverably lost youthful vision. By centring on the possibility of his own imaginative self-deception and mournful loss of poetic vision, Rousseau's story forms Shelley's own elegy for himself as a poet and, indeed, for all other poets and the posthumous shortcomings of poetry.²⁰ These Byronic and Shelleyan instances of tangible visionary insight and loss both inspire and confront poetic desire with the limitations of imaginative possibilities for, as Shelley acknowledges, 'Art and eloquence, / And all the shews o' the world are frail and vain / To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade' (*Alastor*, 710-12). Through their own diverse and diffuse poetic 'lines of light' (*The Witch of Atlas*, 147), Byron and Shelley shared something of Keats's sense that the art of poetic vision is the imaginatively delicate, strenuous, and often frustrating business of 'straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness.'²¹

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¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes: 'a soft fleeting witchery of sound / As twilight Elfins make' ('The Eolian Harp', 28-9). *Coleridge: The Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1912; Oxford, 1969).

² George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (1996; Oxford, 2000), *Don Juan*, XIII. lxxii. 570. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from this edition. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (1977; New York, 2002), 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', 45, 95. Quotations from this edition. Hereafter *SPP*.

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- ³ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Poetical Works 1849-1850* (London, 1850), 'III. By the Sea-Side', 7-8, 127.
- ⁴ William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (1984; Oxford, 2000), 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', 2, 4, 297. Quotations from this edition. Hereafter 'Ode'.
- ⁵ Christopher R. Miller, *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, 2006), 3-4.
- ⁶ On the importance of Italy to the exiled British Romantic see Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic & Victorian Writers in Italy* (Oxford, 2013).
- ⁷ George Gordon Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron* (Paris, 1831), n. 11, 506.
- ⁸ Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Farnham, 2013), 85-92.
- ⁹ John Milton, *The Portable John Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush (1955; Harmondsworth, 1976), *Paradise Lost*, I. 63.
- ¹⁰ Michael O'Neill, 'The Fixed and the Fluid: Identity in Byron and Shelley', *The Byron Journal*, 36 (2008), 105-16, 106.
- ¹¹ Mark Sandy, 'Quest Poetry: *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe, with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford, 2013), 272-88, 276-7. Hereafter *OHS*.
- ¹² Alan M. Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience* (London, 1991), 211-16.
- ¹³ G. Kim Blank, *Wordsworth's Influence on Shelley* (London, 1988), 221-2.
- ¹⁴ Donald H. Reiman notes that Shelley's Rousseau trails 'no clouds of glory' as does Wordsworth's child in the 'Ode'. Reiman, *The Triumph of Life: A Critical Study* (Illinois, 1965), 61.
- ¹⁵ Ralph Pite, 'Shelley and Italy', *OHS*, 31-47, 46. See Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford, 1994).
- ¹⁶ Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot, 2005), 118.
- ¹⁷ J. Hillis Miller, 'Shelley's "The Triumph of Life"', in *Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill (London, 1993), 218-40, 223.
- ¹⁸ Editors' note, *SPP*, n. 2, 95. Compare Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca, NY, 1980), 84-5.

¹⁹ Stuart Peterfreund argues that Rousseau's reductive account of 'the shape all light' amounts to nothing more than a summation of his own needs, in *Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore, 2002), 305-6. See Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1979).

²⁰ Nancy Moore Goslee notes these self-elegising tendencies in *Shelley's Visual Imagination* (Cambridge, 2011), 186.

²¹ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1958), ii. 80.