

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

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Abstract:

This study is an attempt to describe, clarify, and circumscribe Shelley's religious point of view as it is embedded in his poetry. The study finds the commonly seen atheistic image of Shelley to be misleading and, simultaneously, it brings out—rather builds up—a new very Christian profile for the poet, who is found willing to project an everlasting continuity for the civilization represented by the “Cross” at the expense of the civilization represented by the “Crescent.” The study is developed by taking, on the one hand, a general view of Shelley's poetry and, on the other, by analyzing at an extensive length his so called fragmentary poem *The Triumph of Life* and by tying the analysis to *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*, which is a rather factious work that he had finished just before he started writing his last poem and left incomplete. It is also posited that the *Triumph* is not only semantically complete but also thematically repetitive and that a minor editorial change at the end would do away its fragmentary nature. Finally, it is asserted that both *Hellas* and *The Triumph of Life* together present a clear view of Shelley's religious thinking.

عطاءات الشاعر شلي في قصيدتيه (احتفالية الحياة) و(هأس)

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الملخص:

هذه الدراسة محاولة لوصف وإيضاح ورسم الخطوط العريضة لوجهة النظر الدينية للشاعر شلي الواردة في ثنايا شعره. وتخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن الصورة الجمالية هي صورة مضللة وفي ذات الوقت تعرض الدراسة بل تؤكد الخلفية المسيحية العميقة للشاعر الذي يحاول ترسيخ استمرارية مطلقة لحضارة يمثلها (الصليب) على حساب حضارة يمثلها (الهلال).

تم تطوير الدراسة عن طريق إلقاء نظرة عامة على شعر شلي وكذلك عن طريق التحليل الشامل والمطول لقصيدة الشاعر (احتفالية الحياة) وربط هذا التحليل بقصيدتيه (هأس : مسرحية غنائية) التي هي في واقع الأمر عمل مثير للحزبية انتهى منه الشاعر مباشرة قبل أن يبدأ قصيدته الأخيرة التي لم يكملها. ومن الثابت أيضاً أن قصيدة (الاحتفالية) ليست فقط مكتملة دلاليًا، وإنما ورد بها تكرار موضوعي، وأن إدخال تعديل جزئي في نهايتها يجعلها مكتملة البناء. وختاماً فإن من المؤكد أن كلا القصيدتين تمثلان التوجه الواضح للتفكير الديني لدى الشاعر شلي.

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

Dr. Mukhtar Chaudhary

Upfront this is another effort to decipher the structure and the implied meaning of Shelley's poem *The Triumph of Life*. But in its fullness this study covers a much larger and, in some ways, unexplored territory. In particular, it is pointed out that a factious stance becomes prominent in Shelley's worldview when this poem is studied along side *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*, a dramatic poem Shelley had just finished before he started composing his (fragmentary?) swan-song. This discussion reveals that, when faced with the Islamic Other, he finds it opportune to be with and in the Christian camp. Yet, in this regard, his accepted image among the Christians has been and still is—at least in some very conservative religious circles—not only that of an atheist but also of a blasphemous iconoclastic radical in social, political and moral spheres. Based on the obvious and implied meaning of Shelley's poetry in general and *The Triumph of Life* and *Hellas* in particular, this study shows a serious contradiction between his usually accepted image and his position that emerges from his poetry. In his poetry, his worldview is not as devoid of religious content as is commonly understood. In fact, like every narrow minded Christian, he exhibits a factious ambience in worldly matters.

Right from the start, reading atheism in Shelley's poetry became a usual practice. In October 1821, a review article by Rev. Dr. W. S. Walker on *Prometheus Unbound with Other Poems* appeared in *The Quarterly Review* in which Shelley was accused of blasphemy against Jesus Christ and of the "most flagrant offences against morality and religion" (qtd. in Redpath 369). Another reverend, George Croly, reviewed *Adonais* in December 1821 and said: "Percy Shelley feels his helplessness of poetic reputation, and therefore lifts himself on the stilts of blasphemy. He is the only verseman of the day, who has dared, in a Christian country, to work out for himself the character of direct ATHEISM" (qtd. in Redpath 374; emphasis original). Readers of *Adonais* would know that Rev. Croly obviously based his judgment on what was generally known about Shelley's faith and not on a thorough understanding of the content of the poem he was reviewing. If he had done that he could at best charge Shelley of Deism—a faith that acknowledges the existence of a divine being without accepting revelation or religious dogma and which, as Timothy Morton points out,

was in Shelley's time often equated with radical views (4). But the reverend chose not to pay attention to the details of the poem. These and some other religious pontiffs set a trend in Shelley criticism that usually ignores or misinterprets the intent of his poetry. Even Byron had accused Shelley of atheism in a peculiarly roundabout way. He was asked by Shelley to let Allegra (Byron's illegitimate daughter by Clare) live in his household. In a letter to some friends, Byron ridiculed the suggestion by saying that he could not let the little girl "perish of starvation and green fruit" [a rather ungenerous reference to Shelley's vegetarian habit] or to let her "believe that there is no Deity" (qtd. in Crompton 193). Shelley was not spared even when he died. *The Courier* reported his death with these words: "Shelley the writer of some infidel poetry has been drowned; now he knows whether there is a God or no" (qtd. in Holmes 730). This trend, inevitably because of Shelley's own pamphlet on the *Necessity of Atheism* and his direct statements in *Queen Mab* (see sections VI and VII, in particular), has come down to the modern times. In the 20th century, a lot of adverse criticism was directed at Shelley. T. S. Eliot, for instance, called him a "blackguard" and then went on to admit: "some of Shelley's views I positively dislike" (89—100). He was even charged of promoting atheistic tendencies in his readers. Graham Hough, for example, while discussing George More's poetic development, observed that "from Shelley the young More had learnt atheism" (188).

It is instructive to note, however, that the need for correction in this negative view of Shelley was also pointed out by some very early reviewers. One reviewer's effort is especially noteworthy, for it touches on almost all the aspects of prejudice against Shelley's poetry. In August 1824, E. Haselfoot (apparently a pseudonym) reviewed Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* in *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*. To begin with, he points out the role of public opinion in negatively estimating Shelley's imaginative efforts. After asserting that "public opinion...has doomed the name of Shelley to unmixed reprobation," Haselfoot observes: "Could he have refrained from violating the majesty of custom...could he have avoided collision with established interest,...could he have condescended, as many others have done, to mask his peculiar opinions under a decent guise of conformity, he might have remained undisturbed." Then he extols the beauty of Shelley's poetry and makes a statement fit to be considered a foreshadowing of the textual autonomy which is an important rule put down by new critics in the 20th century. "Our only aim," concludes this reviewer, "is to impress on the reader the self-evident truth that the intellectual as well as the moral character of

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

Shelley's writings is to be judged of *from the writings themselves*" (qtd. in Redpath 400—401, emphasis added).

Following this positive lead, several poet-commentators pointed out the presence of religious elements in Shelley's poems not necessarily to mollify the anger of religious men but rather to suggest their biased prejudgments. One of the early sympathizers was Leigh Hunt (1784—1859), who defended Shelley against the attacks of religious conservatives. But since he himself was despised as "the meanest, the filthiest, and most vulgar of Cockney poetasters" (qtd. in Redpath 469) by his contemporaries, his defense further vitiated the public image of Shelley. An effective argument was, however, made later in the 19th century by Robert Browning who saw religious elements in Shelley's poetry in a different light. "I call him a man of religious mind," Browning claimed in his essay on Shelley, "because every audacious negative cast up by him against the Divine was interpenetrated with a mood of reverence and adoration" (683). Putting aside the public prejudice and biographical details of Shelley's life and basing his judgment on Shelley's poetry, Browning concluded: "I shall say what I think,—had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians" (684). W. B. Yeats, who had a similar view of Shelley's work, actually called *Prometheus Unbound* a "sacred book" (65). In the later half of the 20th century, the trend to read Christianity in Shelley's poems became even stronger. James Allsup, a notable American critic, posited that Shelley was "in essence a Christian poet" (ix). Harold Bloom, while introducing his selection of modern essays on Shelley in 1985, observed that Shelley was "primarily" a religious poet (2) who saw a great power in the universe that exposes the fraud of "historical Christianity" (4). Accordingly, Bloom calls *Prometheus Unbound* "a dark parody of Christian salvation myth" (12). Paul De Man, however, remarked that Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* was a "non-religious poem" (140). My explanation of the text of this poem will show that De Man's idea is untenable.

It is not the purpose of this paper to present a systematic defense of Shelley's views on Christianity; nor is it to disregard his statements in the *Necessity of Atheism* and in *Queen Mab*. Nevertheless, here is an effort certainly to study and to evaluate the worldview that emerges from his poetry itself. In that worldview, it appears that Shelley is very much conscious of the presence of an overarching spiritual being (in common parlance called God) and that he quite enthusiastically praises Christ in much the same way as any Christian is likely to do. Reference is made to his poetry in general but, as was indicated in the opening paragraph, the

primary focus of this study is on two of the very last poems of Shelley: *The Triumph of Life* and *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*. In the final analysis, this paper makes three points. First, even though the incompleteness of *The Triumph of Life* is obvious because of the way it ends, it is posited that the semantic field of this poem suggests completeness and calls for a slightly different editing only in the last few lines. The poem itself then, like another celebrated fragment, *Kubla Khan*, would be accepted semantically complete and contextually typical of its author. Second, while recognizing the often pointed out Dantean influence (Leavis 230, Ferber 139—40, Holmes 718—20, Knight 251), it is asserted that the poem is continuing an established tradition of vision literature in English. Actually, it may profitably be compared with such allegorical works as *Piers Ploughman* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Third, by analyzing the significance of some symbols used in the poem, it is suggested that Shelley's personal faith in Christianity as established by Christ is parallel if not similar to that of most practitioners of this faith. His reaction to Islam shown in his dramatic poem, *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*, a work Shelley had finished just before he started writing *The Triumph of Life*, actually puts him at par with those who, after nine-eleven, started demonizing Muslims. In the discussion that follows, these ideas may overlap or one idea may seem buried in the lengthy analysis of some portions of the poem; but all three constitute the main burden of this paper.

The method followed to arrive at generalizations is, on the whole, that of close reading as stipulated by New Criticism. There is, however, one inevitable exception. Despite the fact that both *Hellas* and the *Triumph* have dramatic elements, the point of view in both tends to be authorial. Practically all important ideas or conclusions ultimately are those of Shelley's. There is very little, if any, distance between the narrative voice and the poet. This may seem to contradict an important element of New Criticism but, in case of Romantic poetry in general and that of Shelley in particular, the narrowing down or even disappearance of esthetic distance is not an aberration. "Shelley is," as F. R. Leavis points out, "habitually his own hero: Alastor, Laon, The Sensitive Plant,...and Prometheus" (221—22). Just as the Rousseau of the *Triumph* is his mouth-piece, so is the Chorus in his dramatic poem *Hellas*. Since the ideas in *Hellas* are expressed in quite a straightforward and, perhaps, even stereotypically blunt manner, not much space is given to it. Only the authorial point of view and Shelley's open animosity to the Turks and Islam are highlighted toward the end of this paper. On the other hand, the *Triumph* is complex; its meanings are buried in allegorical symbols. Accordingly, much of the space is used to explain the significance of

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

these symbols. Whatever is common in both, however, is pointed out in the body of this paper.

I

Upon a Journey

In the beginning, it will be helpful to establish a place for the *Triumph* in the vision literature, for it will introduce us to the actual framework and content of the poem. Like Dante, the poet-speaker in *The Triumph of Life* sees a vision. In this vision, as Dante is guided by Virgil and Beatrice, Shelley is guided, in part, by Rousseau but basically by his own reflective powers. Just as the *Divine Comedy* is written in terza-rima—tercets having aba, bcb, cdc rhyme scheme—Shelley's poem follows the same prosodic structure. These are the most obvious similarities between the two works. In some other respects, Shelley's poem is more consonant with *Piers Ploughman* and *Pilgrims Progress*, or with works in which the journey motif occurs. In such works the poet usually falls asleep and looks at a multitude of people who are moving about in this world and are engaged in acts that violate religious teaching. On the contrary, Dante miraculously wakes up in Hell and, by observing the fate of various historically important individuals, wants to give a picture of life actually lived by them when alive. Ostensibly Shelley's final aim is to find an answer to this question: "What is Life?" and not, as is the concern of Dante, Langland, and Bunyan, to describe the way divine grace is sought or opposed by people. A brief analysis of the text of Shelley's poem will further clarify these points.

The first forty lines of the poem serve as a prologue. In this part, an important symbol of the poem is introduced.

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. (1—4)¹

¹ The line references are to the text edited by Thomas Hutchinson with corrections by G. M. Matthews, but occasionally reference is also made to Shelley's Norton critical edition put out by Raiman and Powers.

In itself, the sun is an agency of good. As it rises, "the mask of darkness" is lifted and the whole of nature becomes alive. Even the "ocean's orison [arises]" (7), a fascinating Shelleyan way of describing the beginning of evaporation from the surface of the sea after sunrise. The religious connotation is noteworthy about which more will be said later. But here it is necessary to see how some of the implications of this symbol affect the content of Shelley's poem. In addition to its life-giving power, the sun is an instrument that makes "all things...that wear/ The form and character of mortal mould...to bear/ Their portion of the toil, which he of old/ Took as his own" (16—19, emphasis added). Shelley does not say that all things begin their normal life but that they begin "their portion of the toil." The implication that there is no freedom of the will is quite clear. All things of "mortal mould"—the phrase obviously includes human beings—are subject to some external necessity. The things are subject to the sun, and the sun in turn is subject to some one who is not named. The idea that the whole of nature, the visible phenomenon, is living out a predetermined or preordained scheme is clearly implied in this part of the poem. And, the sun that makes every thing to respond to its nature also eclipses "the stars that gem the cone of night" (32—33). The sun's light comes at the expense of another light in which Shelley had been thinking "thoughts which must remain untold" (29). But even when the sunlight is there, he himself creates or imagines a hazy moonlit-like atmosphere as a preparation for his glimpse of what human beings have been doing in the day. This suggests that for Shelley sunlight is not conducive to poetic creation or to finding out truth about human life. As such, the sun performs contradictory roles: it regenerates as well as obstructs. And if, as is maintained by some critics, the sun is often a symbol of Deity in Shelley's poetry (Reiman 15, Knight 253), the Deity for Shelley here in the poem is a source of creative as well as destructive, at the least, obstructive forces. Perhaps, these are the thoughts he wanted to stay untold. Another meaning of "the sun" will be discussed a little later; but here it is important to completely see the function of the opening of *The Triumph of Life*.

The second function of the prologue is that it specifies the poet's position from where he surveys the human pageant. While all things of mortal mould respond to the necessity of their nature, Shelley himself falls into a trance which, he hastens to say, is "not slumber" (30). Nonetheless, he portrays himself as one mortal-mould that has not responded to the sun's call and has gone into some sort of dreamy wakefulness under a chestnut tree on the slopes of the Apennine so that before him flies the night, behind him rises the day; at his feet is the deep, and Heaven above his head (25—28) and in this semi trance

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

Shelley is supposed to have seen what is described in the rest of the poem. From the description of this position, it is not difficult to see that Shelley in *The Triumph of Life* gives, paradoxically, an objective yet imaginative perception of the worldly scene.

The mode of this perception bears a striking similarity with those of Langland and Bunyan. In order to clearly establish a place for the *Triumph* in the vision literature of English and before looking at what Shelley sees in his trance, it is appropriate to compare his preparation to see life's pageant with those of Langland and Bunyan. Here is what Langland says before he sees "The Plain Full of People": "One summer season, when the sun was warm, I rigged myself out in shaggy clothes, as if I were a shepherd...and...I set out to roam far and wide through the world, hoping to hear of marvels...But on a morning in May...as I lay down to rest under a broad bank of the side of a stream...I fell asleep" (25). The rest of Langland's book is a record of his dream in which he sees humanity going about its work in this world. And here is Bunyan: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream" (503). Langland in *Piers Ploughman* sees crowds of people moving between the Tower of Truth and the Dungeon of Falsehood. His allegorical stance is quite obvious and needs no elaboration. Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* observes the arduous journey of the faithful Christian to the celestial city. Both Langland and Bunyan assume a posture to give their perceptions of life. Bunyan's religious outlook resembles that of Langland. Despite the difference in the content of their respective visions, however, the posture assumed by Shelley is much the same. Another similarity in these three writers is that, unlike Dante, they perceive, at least in the opening parts of their works, real day to day life and do not conjure up shadows from beyond the grave. Shelley, however, soon begins to resemble Dante: with Rouseau's help, he too names people who died recently or in the remote past. Falling asleep, then, is a way or posture assumed by these writers of vision literature. Understandably, comparing imagination to a trance or a wakeful dream has become a common place in English literature. Shelley's vision, it may be noted, becomes more like a scientific observation of human existence. So what he sees is meant to be seen as truth about life. In their own way Dante, Langland, and Bunyan were also giving their picture of human life in this world.

Sitting on a "public way... strewn with summer dust," Shelley sees a "great stream of people" of all ages "hurrying to and fro." All of them are engaged in hectic activity, each absorbed in individual fears and

hopes, and strictly follow the dusty pathway without any clear notion of destination. All the time, Shelley notes, they are unmindful of the wayside fountains, flowers and green grass and are in pursuit of "their folly as of old" (41—46). A whiff of Langland may be obvious here. But when we look at the implication of this part of the poem, we can see that Shelley's criticism of the scene is not due to the religious concerns but because the people are ignoring, in fact, not even looking at the sides of the pathway. As if in blinkers, they keep treading on their customary way. The fountains, the flowers and grass, and every loveliness that exist "beside a public way" of this world do not even register on the consciousness of the multitude. They move on the beaten path, keeping meaningless and unsatisfying routine while the wayside attractions could have provided a more meaningful experience. Obviously, Shelley here is referring to the possibilities of life in nature and deprivations of life in society, and to the engaging freshness of new ways and the petrifying habits of the old. We will not stretch the point too far if we say that Shelley here is conscious of the now well known opposition between the Neoclassic and the Romantic attitudes—between an almost blind habitual pursuit and a conscious preference for the different.

Paradoxically, however, Shelley's position in the poem is that of an observer and not that of a participant. The life he himself lives is apparently on the wayside, different from that of those beating the old path. He is someone who is conscious of the new possibilities of human experience and who observes

All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
He made one of the multitude, and so
Was borne amid the crowd, as through the sky
One of the million leaves of summer's bier;
Old age and youth, manhood and infancy
Mixed in one mighty torrent... (48—53).

Images and ideas from two earlier poems, *Adonais* and *Ode to the West Wind*, are repeated here. Since these ideas are crucial to our analysis of *The Triumph of Life*, the common ideas and images in these poems can be profitably looked at simultaneously. First, let us look at what is common in the *Triumph* and *Adonais*. The following lines of *Adonais* repeat the first half of the passage from the *Triumph*.

Shelley's Pickings in *The Triumph of Life* and *Hellas*

Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene
The actors or spectators? Great and mean
Most massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.
As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to
sorrow. (184—189)

Puzzling questions about the origin, purpose, and destination of human life are raised by Shelley in both. Also the futility of almost absurd repetition of human experience is pointed very clearly in the lines from *Adonais* and implicitly in the whole of *The Triumph of Life*. But as will be clear from the rest of this study, the main thrust of the *Triumph* is toward knowing the nature, the "whatness," of life. One other clear difference between the two passages is that in the first Shelley is only a spectator but in the second, as the collective pronoun 'we' shows, he is a participant. His lot is the same as that of the rest of humanity. The image of the leaves hurled around, "One of the million leaves of summer's bier," connects the life of the multitude on the dusty pathway of *The Triumph of Life* with leaves, the "pestilence-stricken multitudes," swirled around in *Ode to the West Wind*: This image, comparing humans with leaves driven around by wind, suggests the lightness and insignificance of the members of the multitude. Just as it suggests helplessness before the west wind, which is a felt yet invisible force, so it does in the *Triumph* with the added suggestion of a lack of will and knowledge as to why they are moving on the dusty way. A certain amount of repetition of ideas has, unquestionably, taken place.

The Chariot of Life

The purpose of these comparisons, however, is to show that Shelley has been struggling to find answers to life's imponderable questions in some of his earlier work and that now, in his last ditch effort, he wishes to find some tangible hints. The result is a creation of some more images, at once symbolic and realistically descriptive of European consciousness of human experience in history. Among these images, the chariot of life, Rousseau's life, and a Shape all Light are outstanding for they, as described in *The Triumph of Life*, provide some hints to Shelley's ultimate meaning.

In Shelley's vision, the appearance of the chariot is shrouded in elemental imagery. As it appears, a "cold glare, intenser than the noon,/ But icy cold" has obscured the sun as the sun obscures "the stars" (77—80). Within the chariot sits a Shape deformed by years. If this shape is life, as Rousseau informs the poet at line 180, the reference to its years and deformity clearly suggests that it is quite old and, accordingly, the crowd whirling around it has been not only in its thrall but also changing since the moment it hopped into her chariot, whose starting point or origin is never explicitly stated in the poem. But some very obvious clues may be seen in Shelley's description of the way the chariot is pulled:

...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
Was lost: I heard alone on the air's soft stream
The music of their ever moving wings. (93—98)

The reference to the Roman god of beginnings and endings may suggest that the charioteer is looking in all directions but soon we learn that there is a band on his eyes. So the chariot represents a blind onward movement, unaware "of all that is, has been, or will be done" (104). There are no horses but "Shapes" that are pulling the chariot and Shelley can hear the sound of their wings. The presence of "lightnings," "Shadow," and "Shapes" produce an eerie Miltonic atmosphere. There may be a bit more here than is obvious on the surface. One may ask: Aren't these "ever moving wings" of those "thousands" who, as Milton states in his sonnet on blindness, "at His bidding speed,/ ... post o'er land and sea without rest"—i. e., of angels who Milton thinks are carrying the divine work in the universe. This suggestion assumes a great significance when we look at the manner of the chariot's movement in the light of sun-imagery in Shelley's poem.

It was stated earlier that for some critics, the sun in Shelley's poetry is the image of the Deity. At this juncture, it is pertinent to explain it clearly with reference to *The Triumph of Life*. There are two places in the *Triumph* where the sun is more than the solar disc or the star of our galaxy. The first one has already been referred to in pointing out the implacable Necessity. As the poem opens, the reader is told that the Sun had assumed a responsibility of bearing his portion of the toil "which he of old/ Took as his own and then imposed" on all things of "mortal

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

mould" (18—20). This can be seen as a vague yet sure hint to Christ's role vis-a-vis mankind as elaborated in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In book three (227—265), Milton presents the Christian notion of how the Son would undertake human redemption through his own sacrifice by appearing and dying in flesh. That is to say, Christ becomes, according to Milton, a part of divine creation which, in turn, follows him (the Christ) to regain the grace it lost because of Adam's sin. In this example, the duality between the "Sun" and the "Son" disappears only if we hear in the *Triumph* some Miltonic echoes which certainly are there, though a bit mute. But our claim is strengthened by the fact that Shelley's questions about whence, why, and whither of this life are also present in Milton's poem. Here is, for instance, Eve musing after she first wakes up in paradise:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked, and found myself reposed
Under a shade on flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence hither brought, and how. (IV, ll. 449—
452).

Other images such as fountain, water, cave or cavern, and flowers that are present on the wayside in the *Triumph* occur in book three of *Paradise Lost* as well. Particularly noteworthy is "the murmuring sound Of water" which forms a pool and Eve sees her own reflection in it (IV, ll. 453—54 ff). It is after this experience that Eve is told by a voice to meet Adam to whom she would "bear multitudes." Shouldn't it be easy here then to identify the old haggard and hooded Shape sitting in Shelley's car? Anyway, the purpose of these examples is to show that there are echoes in Shelley's poem of a greater poem which describes from a Christian perspective how life began. It is very likely that Shelley has picked up hints from Milton, and has chosen to develop a mystery around the origin of life.

Furthermore, the second context in which the duality of the "Sun" and the "Son" is literally obliterated, actually suggests that, despite the oft trumpeted atheism of Shelley, there are ideas in his poetry that make him a devotee of pristine teaching of Christ. In a remarkable passage of the *Triumph*, Shelley sees among the captives of the car "anarch chiefs," the Roman Constantine, and divine men like the two Popes, Gregory and John, and then observes that they

...rose like shadows between men and God;

Till that eclipse, still hanging over heaven,
Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode,
For the true sun it quenched (284—292, emphasis added)

Here the focus is on that historical and fateful collusion which took place between worldly men of power and divine authority as represented by leaders of religions and which gave rise to the state-supported and organized Christianity (Toynbee 16, 85, 144), resulting in a loss, according to Shelley, of not only the true spirit of Christ's message but also the liberty of human soul. About this role of the religious and worldly forces more will be said in the next section under Rousseau. Presently its purpose is to show that whenever Shelley rails against God, he makes it clear he has the God of organized Christianity in mind and not the true Deity of love and harmony. Those who might pick up a quarrel here are advised to ponder over his great stanza in *Adonais* (LII) in which this line occurs: "The One remains, the many change and pass." No ingeniously secular interpretation of "the One" of this line can ignore that Shelley makes Keats part of the one spirit that rolls through Nature and, hence, regards him immortal. Skeptics will also greatly benefit from one of his early poems entitled *A Sabbath Walk* and hear him at once denouncing the priest's God and adulating "that Divinity whose work and self is harmony and wisdom, truth and love" (21—22). Some of his fire against the priestly religion may be enlightening:

...to the man sincerely good
Each day will be a sabbath day,
....
The God he serves requires no cringing creed,
No idle prayers, no senseless mummeries,
No gold, no temples and no hireling priests. (*The Esdaile Poems*, pp.3—4)

Even before he took up systematic argument against organized Christianity, he put down lack of liberty that could pass for humility, criticized paying of money (the tithes, for example) that would maintain a church establishment, ridiculed limiting remembrance of God to temples and to agency of priests that would not let an individual soul have direct access to the Deity. It is amazing how tactfully the young Shelley could describe and dismiss the priestly hold on the spiritual life

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

of man. More about Shelley, the Christian, will become clear in our examination of *Hellas*.

So, viewed in the light of "sun" imagery, Shelley's visionary chariot is carrying in it the Eve of paradise and, by implication, woman's lure to which all fall victim; none escapes, and none survives. From lines 41—185, the reader is given the dream-like vision of Shelley himself. This vision resembles in important respects—onrush of sleep, seeing multitudes of people caught up in their habitual life-routine, inattention to things outside the routine that may be more rewarding than a blind pursuit of custom—Langland's and Bunyan's imaginative perception of the human spectacle. This portion of the poem presents one observer's (Shelley's own) look at life, in which life resembles a tyrant who puts its yoke around the necks of both humans and natural objects. All Nature is an outcome of a universal, procreative urge—often sung as love by poets, including Shelley himself.

Rousseau

After line 185, the poem becomes dramatic. A sort of dialogue ensues between Rousseau and Shelley in which most of the clichés about life are either suggested or stated. It's important to note here that Rousseau is chosen as a guide because he, like Shelley, believed that the purity of the human soul was stained by social environment (Raimen 42) and that man's liberty was compromised in the established system of Church and worldly government. Yet, the Rousseau of the *Triumph* is a creation of Shelley's own mind, a mind looking for answers to questions about life. In the poem, after answering Shelley's question about his own identity, Rousseau explains the captives of the car and the reader is afforded a panoramic view of history. The captives are powerful religious, political, and intellectual men who, unlike the lustful young and limping old of the earlier vision of Shelley, resisted the external necessity but fell victim to their own internal powers and hence fell victim to life, the inexorable orgasm. Life's serfdom is universal. All types of men pay their fealty. Three classes among them are prominent: men of religion, men of power, and philosophers and bards of old. Napoleon is also seen in chains. Bishops, kings or warriors, and sages—in fact, all masters of thought from Plato on down to Voltaire—are seen serving their time in the prison of life. As Rousseau puts it,

...Figures ever new

Rise on the bubble, paint them as you may;

We have but thrown, as those before us threw,

Our shadows on it as it passed away (248—251)

All the greats of history do leave a mark but they are not like the eagle spirits of Socrates and Jesus who sowed a seed of wisdom but stayed detached from the worldly attractions and courageously gave up their life. All the greats of history, says Rousseau, lacked self-knowledge. It's not very clear what he may mean by this judgment. He may mean that they all, himself included he seems to suggest, were pretenders. Even the sages and bards of old are among the pretenders. But if they and their lives were without weight or substance, how could they leave a mark "on the bubble?" A peculiar lack of clarity, almost contradictory romantic vagueness, characterizes Rousseau's words. Actually, it is not very clear what Rousseau or even Shelley mean by life. They both might as well be talking about not just the power of life but of death, or of every soul's entrance into and exit from matter. If so, one may not resist a feeling of déjà vu. Certainly, a question: "Is this any thing new that Shelley learns from his guide?" must arise. After all, the revealed religions have described life as a kind of union between spirit and flesh—a union that comes to end with death, sending dust unto dust and spirit unto its source.

The same feeling may occur when we hear Rousseau's response to Shelley's questions:

Whence comest thou? And whither goest thou?

How did thy course begin?and why? (296—297)

It is helpful to remember that these are the same questions that Shelley had raised in *Adonais* and had repeated in the first part of the *Triumph*. They are also the questions of Eve after her awakening in paradise. In response, what Rousseau says is at best another version of what Shelley had described as "maniac dance" (110) and at worst an admission of no knowledge at all.

... Whence I am, I partly 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

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

From thee. (300—308)

So the questions: "Why the pageant of life should be as it is?" and "What will be its end?" are not, rather cannot be answered by Shelley's guide. There is, however, a way suggested by the guide to find answers: Shelley can give up his stance as an observer and can experience "this wretchedness." And after this judgmental answer, Rousseau proceeds, presumably, to answer the first question and what we get is a version of Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* marred by ambivalence. Rousseau seems to be aware of his "sleep" in a cavern surrounded by an Edenic atmosphere, as also was Eve when she first woke up and Wordsworth's child of "visionary gleam" after birth. But whether his "life had been before that sleep" (333) he does not know. After he woke up, he felt that for some time the earth was shrouded in a "light diviner than the common sun" (l. 338). From Rousseau's account of his birth, it is clear that even the first question by Shelley has not been answered. At its best, the account is a garbled version of Eve's waking up in paradise as mentioned earlier in this discussion or that of Wordsworth's description of the postnatal change. In each case, a state of innocence is gradually replaced by that of experience. Clearly, Rousseau does not add any thing to Shelley's, most likely, pretended lack of knowledge about the origin and destination of life.

A Shape All Light

But the hope of unlocking the secret is kept alive by bringing in a further development of Rousseau's narrative. "A Shape all light" at line 352 is introduced, presumably, to provide answers. The Shape, however, turns out to be the vaguest and most tantalizing image in the *Triumph*. It's Rousseau who sees and tries to describe it. His attempt results in a series of comparisons and analogies. To begin with, the Shape is seen "amid the sun" (349 ff.); she is like the "dawn;" or a rainbow of colors; she has a "fierce splendour" but she moves somewhere in "deep cavern" and she has a "crystal glass Mantling with bright Nepenthe." She is like a fairy or nymph who treads over waves, her feet dance continuously to the "ceaseless song Of leaves, and winds, and waves and birds, and bees". She blots the "thoughts" of whoever gazes upon her. She is like Lucifer, the morning star (l. 349 ff.). She creates a sense of illusion. In her presence, Rousseau felt "All that was seemed as if it had been not," (385). In short all images used to represent this shape are at once supernatural and natural as if she were a quaint mixture of the ethereal and the terrestrial. As such, she could be a Circe, who in Greek mythology was a daughter of the sun or she could just be Rousseau's idea

of a *femme fatale*. Or as the editors of Shelley's *Poetry and Prose* suggest, she is just creative human imagination (Reiman and Powers 465, n.3) in the light of which Rousseau tries to explain the riddle of life. This is how Rousseau addresses this Shape:

If, as it doth seem,
Thou comest from the realm without a name
Into this valley of perpetual dream,
Show whence I came, and where I am, and why—
(395—398)

This is another place in the poem to give a sense of *déjà vu*, because these are Shelley's questions to Rousseau's phantom and the same questions that he had raised in *Adonais*. According to G. W. Knight: "Shelley is fond of moving in spirals and after one amazing journey gives you another just like it" (187). In *The Triumph of Life*, not only does Shelley throw the reader into spirals, he also makes him see the same picture of life twice. What follows Rousseau's query is, in essence, the same that has been presented in the earlier part of the poem. Yet, Rousseau, after he has tasted from the cup offered by the Shape, is made to utter these words: "on my sight Burst a new vision never seen before" (410—411). But are the details of this new vision really different? Let us see.

The Shape changes into a "day-appearing dream, The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep" (427—428). The visionary gleam of Wordsworth's *Ode* clearly changes into the light of a common day. A "cold bright car" comes as if returning "triumphantly" from war. The car is surrounded by a crew the members of which are "like atomies" dancing in the sun's ray. The idea of Shelley's multitude surrounding the chariot of life is clearly repeated here. And soon, despite the new vision, Rousseau is carried along with the rest. "I among the multitude Was swept" (460—461). But he does see the historical figures, for example Dante, in addition to society of his own time. The kings, the pontiffs, the suffering commons—all are associated with the cold car of life. And quite obviously, this later part of *The Triumph of Life* is a repetition of its earlier part. Even the idea of transience of youth and beauty is presented almost the same way as in the earlier part of the poem.

... . After brief space,
From every form the beauty slowly waned;
From every finest limb and fairest face

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left
The action and the shape without the grace
Of life. (520—423).

In different words, this is a restatement of the ideas in lines 149—169 where the young are in the vanguard of the wild dance and the old, pushed to the periphery, "shake their gray hairs in the insulting wind." Rousseau actually repeats all the Shelleyan phantasmagoria of frustrated desires and the mauled liberties of mankind. And his lament on the transience of beauty reminds the reader of the metaphysical poets who had pressed this idea on human imagination with an unrelenting force.

The Triumph of Life, in short, presents the commonly known poetic ploy to make sense of life, to comprehend its reality, its origin and its purpose. Shelley, a self-confessed atheist, does not go as far as to accept the Miltonic vision of creation and redemption; but his poem reverberates with suggestions of a truly Christian world-view. *Paradise Lost* explains man's fall, *The Triumph of Life* shows what happens to him afterward. The allegorical elements—the sunrise as the beginning, the day as the whole human history, the dusty pathway as the temporal road on which life's journey occurs—are in keeping with those found in literature of vision. The Shape in the chariot, the phantom of Rousseau, and the Shape All Light are simply pegs on which Shelley hangs his intellectual yarn, many threads of which are to be found not only in Shelley's earlier poems but also in the works of other notable writers who have pondered over the purpose and destination of life as seen in the universe. In short, the *Triumph* demonstrates that suffering which Christians believe was to follow Adam's fall. We see each human repeating that fall and living its consequences. Shelley's symbol for this experience is thralldom to life's car carrying the redoubtable hooded figure in it.

And, at this point, it would be appropriate to take umbrage with some of Paul De Man's conclusions about this poem. After pointing out a need for reading "the figure of the sun...in a non-phenomenal way" (136), he declares the *Triumph* a "non-religious" poem (140) and dismisses the appearance of the "Sun" in the opening lines of the poem as "a curiously absurd pseudo-description" (140). One may ask what non-phenomenal significance De Man sees in the poem or can be seen if it is not religious? He clearly contradicts himself. Also, his concluding observation is something of a puzzle. "*The Triumph of Life*," he says, "warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever

happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exits elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence" (144). Does the poem really warn us of any such randomness? Nothing in it is or occurs in a random fashion. As the opening of the poem clearly says, the sun (son) rises because it has assumed a burden of old; the natural phenomenon responds because the Sun (Son) has imposed a duty on it. The multitudes or atomies are around the cars because they are bound to live in this world of flesh and have to participate in the dance of death. The two chariots do seem to make a sudden entrance; but when the reader knows what they are their suddenness begins to refer more to Shelley's and Rousseau's realization of the presence of cars as a fact of human life. The fact represented by them is perennially present. The caravan of Life is ever on the move. The poem points to cause and effect in as minute a detail as possible. The car moves because invisible coursers are pulling it. The young are closer to the car because they have just started living; the old are behind because they lack strength...and so on. And, is death really a random occurrence? Don't birth, growth, and decay precede it? One wonders whether De Man was talking about Shelley's poem or showing off his own philosophical crochets that have nothing to do with the content of this poem. *The Triumph of Life* itself does not let any one underestimate its religious content.

II

The Ending of the Triumph

The foregoing interpretation shows that Shelley has said what he could about life even before he introduces Rousseau as his guide. He learns nothing new from this guide. The ideas of inevitable surrender to life, of consequent suffering, and of apparent purposelessness of the whole pageant are repeated in both the parts of *The Triumph of Life*. A question, therefore, arises: "Could a third part that is promised by the way the poem ends be somehow new or different?"

What is Life? This question, it may be observed, is Shelley's basic concern in the poem. Our analysis reveals that Shelly can describe the effects of life and change and cannot define life as such. Even his guide, Rousseau, can describe what happened to him; he has not supplied answers to what and why of life. Even if he had lived to complete his poem, it is not likely that Shelley would have supplied answers to his own questions that, needless to say, he had asked so many times. All speculation as to what could happen if Shelley had lived has to be futile. But a study of whatever exists clearly reveals a bit of exhaustion of ideas

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

about life. The semantic field—human life on earth—has been completely mapped out. There is a birth, followed by growth, followed by love—actually an attraction toward a process that ensures the cycle of birth-growth-death. If Shelley would have added anything at all to the existing semantic field of the text, he perhaps would have realized that the questions of "why or what" in relation to life are actually beyond human understanding and that they are epistemological imponderables. Moreover, the poem reveals that he is sure of life and its power only because of its outward manifestations just as a physicist is sure of the existence of electrons by observing their behavior. In his essay *On Life*, he wrote: "What is the cause of life?—that is, how was it produced, or what agencies distinct from life, have acted or act upon life? All recorded generations of mankind have wearily busied themselves in inventing answers to this question. And the result has been...Religion. Yet, that the basis of all things cannot be, as the popular philosophy alleges, mind... . Mind, as far as we have any experience of its properties...cannot create, it can only perceive" (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 478). As the interpretation of the *Triumph* given above shows, Shelley himself, despite the aspersion he casts on religion, came close to accepting the religious version of genesis, certainly the one illustrated in *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, as will be clear from our look at *Hellas* below, Shelley the poet is as good a Christian as any body out there in the Western streets, past or present.

If the semantic field of the poem is complete, then shouldn't its text be saved from being continuously labeled as fragmentary? An attempt to do so should be worth its while. The original manuscript of the poem, as shown by Reiman and Powers (p. 470) ends like this:

"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

When Mary Shelley had first brought the poem to light, she had ended it with Shelly's question: "Then, what is life? I cried."—(Hutchinson and Matthews, p. 520). Both endings keep the fragmentariness of the text alive. Perhaps it would have been better to end with the last complete tercet as follows.

"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.

This way, the readers are expected to look at the car of life as described in the poem and to call it either "wretchedness," as Rousseau alleges or to accept it as a Tyrant's yoke, as Shelley has clearly suggested. Each description spells out life as a misery.

This editorial decision would be far more acceptable than the fruitless speculation of how Shelley could have completed it. The *Triumph*, then, would become complete the same way as *Kubla Khan* is now accepted semantically a complete poem and Coleridge's head note to the poem is "usually assumed to be an unnecessary apology" (Lamont 293). After all, in the first half of Coleridge's poem, the Khan, a creation of imagination, assumes powers to reconcile the opposites and the Abyssinian maid in the second part promulgates a desire to have those powers for a creation of new worlds. Just as the power of life is repeatedly manifested in both the first and the second movements of the *Triumph*, so the powers of imagination in both parts of *Kubla Khan* point toward the same magical creations. The new ending of the *Triumph* would certainly help the future readers to regard the poem semantically complete and quite consonant with Shelley's "thorns of life" on which he himself and the rest of mankind, as he has presented it in his swan-song, keep on bleeding.

III

Hellas: A Lyrical Drama

Two ideas clearly stand out in Shelley's *Triumph*: (1) Life is an onward, almost blind movement or a journey imposed on humans; (2) the role of the Sun/Son is crucial in this journey. When we put these two ideas alongside *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*, an altogether different image of Shelley the atheist emerges. His attitude to the Islamic Other and his idea of Christian right to prevail in the onward movement of civilizations—the repetitive semantic field covered in the *Triumph*—put him among those sections of the Western society that after 9/11 have adopted Islam bashing as a serious mission of their life. Furthermore, his quibbling over Sun/Son assumes a clearer meaning. His Sun is the Jesus of Nazareth. He himself is no more a disinterested preacher of human liberty; he is as shallow a partisan spirit as any walking in the Vatican corridors.

Shelley was inspired by the Greek uprising of 1821 against the Ottoman Empire. To enlist the sympathies of the English and to raise funds for the Greeks, he wrote this play (Holmes 681). Practically all of it

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

is a reflection on how the civilization represented by the “Crescent” should and will give way to the one symbolized by the “Cross”. There isn't much of action in it. Mahmud, the Ottoman ruler, is either shown asleep in his seraglio or receiving reports of battles between the Greeks and the Turks. A Chorus of enslaved Greek women presents in its lyrical utterances the past glory and wisdom of Greece, emphasizes the nature of circular movement of civilizations, and predicts not only liberty for Greece but also supremacy of the Cross.

The moon of Mahomet
Arose, and it shall set:
While blazoned as on Heaven's immortal noon
The cross leads generations on (221—224).

No matter who speaks in this drama, the message invariably suggests a downfall of not only the Ottoman Turks but also of their religion, Islam. The Third Messenger, for instance, who brings news of the uprising of the Christians in Syria and Lebanon, is given these lines to utter.

A Dervise learned in the Koran, preaches
That it is written how the sins of Islam
Must raise up a destroyer even now.
The Greeks expect a Saviour from the West,
Who shall not come, men say, in clouds and glory,
But in the omnipresence of that Spirit
In which all live and are. (596—601)

The only authority on which the Dervise could utter such a foreboding would be the divine warning given in the Qur'an (XIII: 11) to the wrongdoers—and, mind you, not to Islam—for change of their fortunes if they do not reform themselves. From his long note to part VI of *Queen Mab*, it appears that Shelley may have been familiar with the Muslim holy book for he refers to an anecdote given in the introduction by Sale, the translator. But whether he was familiar with the Holy Qur'an or not, the idea has been twisted around to suit his intention in *Hellas*. About the expected Saviour, Shelley appended this note: "It is reported that this Messiah had arrived at a seaport near Lacedaemon in an American brig. The association of names and ideas is irresistibly

ludicrous, but the prevalence of such a rumour strongly marks the state of popular enthusiasm in Greece" (479). Lines 600—601 do suggest the actual identity of this savior, i. e., Christ. The spirit of this messenger's news is an imagined accomplishment of the desire contained in the utterance of the chorus quoted above. For, after mentioning the expected savior, he continues to talk of "ominous signs...blazoned broadly on the noon day sky" (ll. 601—602) that foreshadow victory for the Greek Christians. Mahmud himself is shown worrying about the prospects of his empire; he calls in the wise Jew, Ahasuerus, who first stresses the immortality of thought (i. e., the Greek contribution) and then conjures up the Phantom of Mahomet II that is made to predict the downfall of Islam. Addressing Mahmud, the Phantom is made to say:

Islam must fall, but we will reign together

Over its ruins in the world of death." (887—888)

Another long held wish of the Christians is contained in these words. It is actually Shelley the devotee of the Son, who has absorbed every stereotype about the Turk and his faith and, in the guise of dramatic personae, is giving vent to all those prejudices against Islam that had been gathering strength since the middle ages and on down to the moment he was inspired to produce his lyrical drama. Shelley's apprehension of Islam is curiously parallel to that of the Danish cartoonist who insults Islam and its cherished symbols in the name of freedom of speech.

In his Preface to the play, Shelley left no doubt as to his own side in the clash of civilizations by declaring "We [Europeans] are all Greeks" and by castigating the English for giving a tacit support to the Turks: "The English permit their own oppressors to act according to their natural sympathy with the Turkish tyrant, and to brand upon their name the indelible blot of an alliance with *the enemies of domestic happiness, of Christianity and civilization*" (447; emphasis added). Read in the light of the Preface, the words of the Chorus, the Third Messenger, Ahasuerus, and the Phantom of Mahomet II, in fact, the entire text of *Hellas*, translate Shelley's inner feelings and judgments toward the Islamic Other. The "cross" will blaze forth; the "crescent" will set. And that's what every pulpit has always been harping on ever since the emergence of Islam as a force to be reckoned with.

IV

Conclusion

The forgoing discussion of *The Triumph of Life* and *Hellas*, individually and together, point toward some general principles of Shelley's outlook. Like the medieval vision literature, they represent human life as a journey in time. Both, but particularly the *Triumph*, employ much of the allegorical paraphernalia. The day, the road, the pageant, the chariots all seen in a wakeful dream help present Shelley's ideas. The journey on the road is a necessity imposed on humans and the natural phenomenon. The Sun plays a complex role in these poems and the journey they describe. On the one hand it is the phenomenal star, the source of light and energy; on the other, it is parallel to the Son of Christian theology. In Shelley, the duality, Sun/Son, is actually a unity because each performs similar (one may even say, the same) functions. They impose what is imposed on them: i. e., Life, but, paradoxically, also death. Accordingly, Shelley sees life as a Tyrant's yoke. The yoke in action is the spectacle that he sees while sitting under a pine on the mount Apennine. He looks at something puzzling and enigmatic, powerful though not very charming, yet unavoidable and deadly. His view stretches back and forth in time and spots Plato and Voltaire, Constantine and Napoleon, Socrates and Christ, Dante and Rousseau, Gregory and John, monarchs and multitudes, the past which awfully hints at the *Book of Genesis* and the present of European alliances; and then he wonders about the beginning and end of all this pageant rushing blindly headlong. In short, he looks upon a spectacular manifestation of something called life that is invariably changing—replacing one scene, one mode, one civilization with another continually. At the mount Apennine, his vision expands to cover all time.

In this spectacle of change, the only permanent entity is the Sun/Son. In this entity's watch and light the onward movement of the chariot of life and a recurrent illusory power of enchantment enabling the likes of Rousseau to feel its presence keep on beguiling other human beings, who like Shelley keep asking questions. When the poem is seen ending with the words "as if that look must be the last," the reader's as well as Shelley's eyes are expected to have a clear view of the car of life and to take the car as representing the answer to the question: "what is life?" If we accept Shelley's own answer to this question, Life is a Tyrant's yoke around every neck; if we go by Rousseau's vision, it is wretchedness. Neither one is a pretty picture. But the picture keeps on repeating itself. One would assume that whatever Life may be like,

terrible or satisfying, it is for all manners of people, of all manners of faith. But Shelley in *Hellas* rules out that possibility. The continuity, he suggests, is reserved for only the followers of the “Cross”: “The cross leads generations on.”

Browning, following Haselfoot, was right to say that Shelley's Christian mind, his real outlook, was in his poems and not in the boyish disobedient statements, nor in the public reaction to those statements. Confronted with the Muslim Other, Shelley most likely—if he were alive today—would be happy to join those who insult the cherished symbols of Islam, albeit in the name of freedom of speech. After all, Shelley put down the Turks in the interest of freedom.

Shelley's Pickings in The Triumph of Life and Hellas

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