CHAPTER 2

Waiting for the Revolution
Age, Debility, and Disability in The Triumph of Life

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Percy Shelley has been a young man's poet. Ever since Matthew Arnold dubbed his predecessor a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain," Shelley's readers would pit the poet's youthful radicalism against their own grown-up politics and poetics.[1] T. S. Eliot would, for example, rhapsodize about his teenage years misspent idolizing the Romantic poet just to articulate his own newfound, mature modernism:

> The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence – as there is every reason why they should be. And an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence: for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity, but for how many does Shelley remain the companion of age? I confess that I never open the volume of his poems simply because I want to read poetry, but only with some special reason for reference. I find his ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth.[2]

In Eliot's Harvard lecture, he insists that our "affair of adolescence" with Shelley's poetry can hardly survive to be the "companion of age." The "intense period" of unsustainable excitement and early intrigue about political anarchism in *Prometheus Unbound* and extramarital free love in *Epipsychidion* must inevitably settle down into something less "repellant" and more concretely moral, ethical, Christian, and pragmatic. In his mid-forties, Eliot, now the mature professor and poet, would find it impossible to separate Shelley's beautiful poetry from the degenerate and ineffectual philosophy. After all, how could Eliot's early twentieth century glean any actionable insight from the puerile performances of a nineteenth-century poet who died just shy of thirty?

Two hundred years after Shelley's death, we might amend the cliché to say that he is a young woman's poet (tabling for just a moment his problematic gender politics).[3] His is the social media-savvy voice of Alexandria

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Ocasio-Cortez, dreaming of a Green New Deal and the systematic dismantling of institutional inequities; Arnold's the establishment voice of Nancy Pelosi, gently chastising the frenetic beat of ineffectual wings. In this view, youthful radicalism can afford to wait out the corruption of the world, but old age – Arnold's cultural pragmatics, Eliot's moral maturity, and Pelosi's political incrementalism – demands the realpolitik of short-term compromise. In some of his work, Shelley himself invites this ageist false dilemma. In his unfinished essay "On Life," he observes that "As men grow up, this power [of reverie] commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents" (*SPP* 507–508). These aging, "mechanical and habitual agents" inexorably fail to author what he calls "the poetry of life," the transformative thought that creates and legislates a regenerated and reformed world (530). Shelley mounts an impassioned case for the urgency of this "poetical faculty" for his own times: "The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature" (531). In a passage that may as well be describing the eponymous "our times" of this volume, Shelley argues that in a time when greed, selfishness, and materialism have piled on the superficial trappings of happiness, this ostensibly youthful poetry is there to utter into existence the eventual revolution. We only await the "glorious Phantom" to "illumine our tempestuous day" in "England in 1819" or the revolutionary "Spring" in "Ode to the West Wind" (13–14 [327]; 70 [301]). And in *Prometheus Unbound*, Demogorgon's concluding speech dilates the same glorious promise into apocalyptic time: "to hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (IV.573–574 [286]).

What if, however, there is little time to wait? What if, like the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*, the body grows old, deformed, and disabled in the meantime? As Shelley was writing his final major poem, he himself was about to turn thirty and had borne years of suffering due to his own chronic ailments.[4] In the decaying body of an aging revolutionary, Shelley had started to imagine more honestly embodied images of disease, debility, and disability. Mary Shelley, in her posthumous note to *Queen Mab*, documents the shift from the eager, adolescent author of the scandalous, anti-Christian poem to the man a decade later who would sue to stop the circulation of pirated copies of the same poem:

> He did not in his youth look forward to gradual improvement: nay, in those days of intolerance, now almost forgotten, it seemed as easy to look forward to the sort of millennium of freedom and brotherhood, which he thought

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> the proper state of mankind, as to the present reign of moderation and improvement. Ill health made him believe that his race would soon be run; that a year or two was all he had of life. He desired that these years should be useful and illustrious. He saw, in a fervent call on his fellow-creatures to share alike the blessings of the creation, to love and serve each other, the noblest work that life and time permitted him. In this spirit he composed QUEEN MAB. (*CP* II: 849)

In his youthful epigraph to *Queen Mab*, Shelley would happily chant along with Voltaire's burn-it-all-down catchphrase "*Écrasez l'infâme*," but the adult Shelley found it increasingly difficult to wait for the "millennium of freedom and brotherhood" yet to come. To be as "useful and illustrious" as "time permitted him," he would eventually temper the explosive and exuberant revolution of *Queen Mab* into the exquisitely baroque process of reform in *Prometheus Unbound*. But in *The Triumph*, Shelley's lifelong revolution against *l'infâme* – not just the Church but all systems of human oppression and intolerance – had begun to lose steam in the exhausting grind of life's mental and physical attritions and depredations.

Along Shelley's triumphal pageant of a personified Life are the energetic youths who dance ahead of the chariot and the elderly followers who try desperately to keep up, mimicking as best they can (but ultimately failing) the lively dance. Old and young alike exhaust themselves but in elementally distinct ways: "frost in these [old men and women] performs what fire [does] in those [youthful dancers]" (175 [*SPP* 488]). Corrupting nihilism pervades Shelley's maenadic Life, but it is not, however, strictly destiny. In a spot of optimism, Shelley's speaker observes those "sacred few who could not tame / Their spirits to the Conqueror [Life]" (128–129 [487]). Refusing to submit their revolutionary struggles to the triumphal pageant, "they of Athens and Jerusalem," Socrates and Jesus respectively, manage to escape the vicious cycle of Life's influence (134 [487]). Since the speaker's dream vision imagines the "sacred few" at the age of martyrdom, Jesus would have been in his early thirties and Socrates in his early seventies. In both the fallen and unfallen visions of Life, the dancing throng and the sacred few, Shelley repeatedly pairs images of youth and old age in what I argue is the poem's central binary. It persists to the end of the fragmented poem in the long encounter between the youthful fever-dreaming poet and the decaying zombie corpse of Rousseau.

Even though this meeting of the minds is unfortunately left incomplete, many critics are convinced that this conversation would have gone the way of the corrupted dancers instead of some revelatory get-together of Jesus and Socrates. John A. Hodgson argues, for example, "But so far

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as the essence of life on earth is in question, the vision's answer is quite explicit, and thoroughly pessimistic."[5] In this view, the poem's three main encounters of youth and age – the dancers behind and ahead of Life's chariot, Athens and Jerusalem, Rousseau and the speaker – altogether signify the almost inevitable corruption and triumph of natural life over the revolutionary human spirit. In this essay, I suggest instead that, for Shelley, the revolution must be at once young and old, a broadly intergenerational coalition of both the Ocasio-Cortezes and Pelosis of the world. In the unwritten lines of *The Triumph*, Shelley would have struggled to articulate this revolution of generations. In his carefully staged encounters with age and debility, Shelley pieces together a prescient disability theory. As we grow old and disabled waiting for the revolution, Shelley's *The Triumph* is meant to give us an anti-ableist ethics to hold on to in the meantime.[6]

I Disabling Environments

Alan Bewell has already laid some crucial groundwork to view Shelley as this burgeoning disability theorist. "Literature has often employed epidemics as metaphors for social ills," Bewell explains, but Shelley tends to "go beyond metaphor to suggest that power *is* disease; it is the force that creates pathogenic spaces in the world."[7] And in the conclusion to his chapter on Shelley's biosocial utopianism, Bewell reads Shelley's verse, especially *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*, as sophisticated constructions of "one of the most important social theories of disease articulated in the nineteenth century."[8] The colonial disease-bearing environments that Bewell so carefully documents, in other words, are not merely Shelley's decorative metaphors but an earnest and compelling theory about how socially constructed environments themselves not only facilitate contagion but generate the disease itself. Bewell boils down this revolutionary climatology into a simple axiom: "it is not people but places that are sick."[9] It is no great leap, then, to append to Shelley's "social theories of disease" what we now call the social model of disability. In a gentle rephrasing, that axiom could even serve as the very definition of the social model: it is not people who are *disabled* but places that are *disabling*.[10]

The Triumph immediately begins to set the scene of these disabling environments with a forty-line framing device that exactly pits twenty lines of the sun-drenched joy and harmony of "All flowers" and "all [mortal] things" against the twenty lines of the unsettled speaker's perverse "But I" that abruptly arrives out of sync with the natural rhythms of "Continent, / Isle, Ocean" (9, 16–17, 21, 15–16 [*SPP* 483–484]). From the very beginning,

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the speaker finds himself jarringly out of place in a disabling environment paradoxically bathed with an *en*abling sunlight that purports to nourish all flowers and all things. The introductory frame poses an insistent question that animates almost all readers and critics of the poem: can the speaker finally awake into the harmonious natural scene, cured of doubt, skepticism, and suspicion of life's diurnal course? Or, to borrow Shelley's own language, while all else is busy greeting the arriving sun, can the somnolent speaker finally "unclose" his own "trembling eyelids to the kiss of day" (9–10 [483–484])? The surrounding environment abounds with painful oppositions that yearn for resolution but are kept frustratingly open. Bewell prefers to read with the youthful, hopeful Shelley: "Revolution is ecological reclamation, the recovery of a nature produced by human labor and love that has been destroyed by social degradation."[11] In this view, the diseased and disabling environments that surround us can be reclaimed, and the inaccessible natural scene of the first twenty lines can be recovered eventually. Paul de Man, however, takes a bleaker view and concludes that Shelley warns that "nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence."[12] The power of the poem, in other words, is Shelley's abject resignation to the arbitrary whims of the relentless, triumphal pageant of Life and his ultimate inability to recuperate a meaningful "relation" with sun, birds, ocean, isle, and continent.[13] Unfortunately, the poem is a fragment that cuts off one word into line 548, so such conclusions are not easily won. Critics, in short, have either read *The Triumph* as the late, dark turn of Shelley's idealism or filled in the missing Italian tercets with eager projections of a revitalized political activism. In either case, as the revolution matures, the questionable sustainability of a fervent, anarchist politics begins to press upon the aging poet.

Shelley's statement of the problem, I will suggest, is neither exactly Bewell's *reclamation* of healthful environments nor de Man's critique of the naïve fantasy of historicist *recuperation*. Both analyses shape the problem into a clean opposition between the diseased, fallen world of the triumphal pageant and the poet's struggle to reclaim or recuperate an unfallen idealism. These interpretive binaries measure Shelley's success at clawing back from the brink of nihilism. In this view, Shelley is fighting to recover his Promethean idealism from Byronic cynicism. From the careening chariot, poorly driven by its blinded, four-faced Janus, Shelley is trying to call back his favorite avatars of poetic hope: "the chariot of the Fairy Queen" or the "moonlike car" of the Spirit of the

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Hour (59 [*CP* II: 166]; III.iv.111 [*SPP* 267]). The commonplace of Shelley criticism seems to be the poet's desperate shuttling between opposites, forever reclaiming, recuperating, and reconciling pessimism with optimism, conflict with achievement, despair with aspiration, cynicism with idealism, negation with affirmation, tragedy with comedy, as Michael O'Neill notes a "subtle swiftness" in Shelley's "interplay between aspiration and despair."[14] Stuart Sperry invites us "to recollect how protractedly optimism and pessimism, affirmation and negation struggle throughout Shelley's verse."[15] Paul Foot argues that both violence and nonviolence coexist in his characterization of a "red Shelley": "For every quotation or reference in Shelley which proves his suspicions of the mob, his hatred of violence or his belief that political reform can only be accomplished gradually by constitutional means, there is another which proves the opposite."[16] Jerrold Hogle's influential description of Shelley's process of transference similarly articulates this ambivalence as "a rootless passage between different formations."[17] Hugh Roberts nails down "Shelley's 'two thoughts,' which have alternately dominated Shelley criticism for so long" as "a misrecognized form of his 'Lucretianism.'"[18] This brief sampling of the most influential Shelley criticism paints Shelley as a poet of oppositions, always trying to restore, with varying degrees of success, the decay and deformity of an aging revolution to the youthful energy of the first twenty lines' dawning day.

Both Bewell and Nora Crook medicalize this opposition into disease and cure: "Shelley's real fight was with *l'infâme* [the Roman Catholic Church], a belief system which saw disease as necessary, a scourge to goad mankind into righteousness, a merited chastisement which might be tempered, but never abolished."[19] Instead, in Shelley's unorthodox "belief system," *l'infâme* – the diseased social environments of imperial power (Bewell) or religious oppression (Crook) – could be and needed to be treated, cured, and "abolished." In these medical accounts, the powerfully evocative natural scene of the first twenty lines is exactly the goal of Shelley's enthusiastic citation of Voltaire's *Écrasez l'infâme*, the permanent cure for the diseased social environments that have corrupted the human spirit. Here, disease is an acute exception to health. In eradicating that exception, Shelley imagined, according to Bewell, that "for the first time perfect health might be within the grasp of human beings."[20] The symptomology of the poem, however, refuses easy diagnoses of "perfect health," and it is ultimately unclear which social environment is diseased. Even the tranquil harmony at the beginning of *The Triumph* of "the Sun their father" (18 [*SPP* 484]) could prove an *ignis fatuus*, deceiving with promises of a

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peaceful totality of ocean, birds, and flowers. The vision of ostensibly "perfect health" only serves, for example, to mock and disable the poet's own soporific blindness. Blinded by the paternal sun, father to all but him, the speaker must look away and seek another conception of healthful ecology by plunging himself into a different dream. The goal of curing acute disease finally comes up short in explaining Shelley's inability to settle on a stable notion of "perfect health."

Instead of *acute* disease – illness that vanishes as quickly as a cure is identified – I substitute the language of *chronic* illness, debility, and disability. In addition to curing the social environments of the diseases of imperial overreach, religious intolerance, and systemic oppression, Shelley also articulates an ethic of constant care. The idea of "perfect health" means more than quickly administering the identified social cure. As Demogorgon warns at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*, the end of Jupiter's tyrannic reign does not mean the work is done:

> Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,—
> These are the seals of that most firm assurance
> Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
> And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
> Mother of many acts and hours, should free
> The serpent that would clasp her with his length,—
> These are the spells by which to reassume
> An empire o'er the disentangled Doom. (IV.562–569 [*SPP* 285])

Demogorgon warns us of a precarious utopia with a looming contingency of "doom" even if "the pit over Destruction's strength" is barred with "that most firm assurance." Even utopias eventually age, and Eternity's "infirm hand" might slip and allow the serpent to infect the world anew. The "spells by which to reassume / An empire o'er the disentangled Doom" – "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance" – signify a kind of perennial care for the chronic illness of the human condition. The "infirm hand" of age becomes much more prominent in *The Triumph*, a poem that allows no rest stop at a Promethean utopia and finally demands "that most firm assurance" of a just theory of disability.

II Eagles to Their Native Noon

Having turned away from the sun's benevolent but disabling paternalism, the dreaming speaker finds a second potential utopian cure in those that sit out the grotesque pageant of Life and prefer the quiet dignity of immortal martyrdom:

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

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

Were there; for they of Athens and Jerusalem
Were neither mid the mighty captives seen
Nor mid the ribald crowd that followed them

Or fled before… (128–137 [*SPP* 487])

A raucous travesty of the late Republican Roman triumph, Life's pageant makes an elaborate show of "mighty captives" while the "ribald crowd" of old men and women lag behind, and the youth who "fled before" are dancing themselves into an orgiastic "foam after the Ocean's wrath / Is spent upon the desert shore" (163–164 [488]). Only "the sacred few" would not submit to "the Conqueror" Life; "they of Athens [Socrates] and Jerusalem [Jesus]" forgo "the maniac dance" and ensure the immortality of their lives through the enduring discourses of philosophy and religion (110 [487]). Like the biblical eagles who renewed their youth by flying into the sun, the poisoned Socrates and the crucified Jesus return to "their native noon" and continue to light the way through millennia of human history.[21] An attractive and even seductive reading of this passage has been that the *The Triumph* was Shelley's elaborate suicide note set to the infernal beat of Dante's *terza rima*. And his drowning along the way from Livorno to Lerici anointed him, at the glorious end, among the "sacred few" as he heroically martyred himself to the cause of human liberty. Here is another of Shelley's potential cures for social ills, a twisted vision of "perfect health" through immortalized self-harm.

But just as the speaker turns away from the nourishing beams of the sun in the very beginning, he quickly leaves both Socrates and Jesus behind to focus on the fascinating, debased spectacle of the triumphal pageant. Yet again, the speaker refuses to settle on what should be an ideal. Ahead are the "Maidens and youths" who "fling their wild arms in the air / As their feet twinkle" (149–150 [*SPP* 488]). And behind:

Old men, and women foully disarrayed
Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind,

Limp in the dance and strain with limbs decayed
To reach the car of light which leaves them still
Farther behind and deeper in the shade. (165–169 [*488*])

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Socrates and Jesus can hardly compete with the relentless pace of the wild, intricate, and musical verse that follows. Shelley's speaker obliquely revisits and revises the concluding slogan of *The Mask of Anarchy*: "Ye are many—they are [the sacred] few" (372 [326]). The many are endlessly interesting while the few are swept away into forgetfulness. Even those "sacred few" who institutionalized philosophy and religion will hardly matter compared to the rushing, democratic throng of human life. This is, in short, no suicide note, no prelude to the poet's own desired martyrdom. Shelley will always be much more a poet of the clamorous crowd than an obedient partisan of "the sacred few" or the philosopher kings who would systematize the good life from the top down.

Instead, the good life must be theorized in the crush of the aging, deforming, debilitated, and disabled dancers, "mid the mighty captives" and "mid the ribald crowd." Whereas "they of Athens and Jerusalem" had the luxury of skipping out on the triumphal pageant of Life, Shelley's speaker quickly marks the uselessness of his avian simile and the seductive illusion of eternally renewed youth. When eagles stare down the sun, they are born anew, but our own eyes and bodies are mere vessels of multiplying vulnerabilities and inevitable decay. Neither the paternal sun from the first twenty lines nor the youth-renewing sun of "the sacred few" can compete with the all too human interest of the dimmer but more spectacular dance of Life. Even in death, it seems Shelley was still refusing the martyrdom of Socrates and Jesus. Found on Shelley's waterlogged and badly decomposing corpse on the shores of Viareggio, about halfway between Livorno and the intended destination of Lerici, was the last volume of John Keats's poetry, which included similarly ecstatic yet disappointing lines about the eternal youth of figures on a Grecian urn, "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting, and for ever young."[22] By the end of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats's speaker, much like Shelley's, is cast out of the eternally frozen scene and chastised by the "Cold Pastoral" of immortal youth.[23] The naïve image of a revolutionary utopia, forever warm and young, cruelly excludes the aging crowd to privilege the able-bodied few. In *The Triumph*, the stable sunlight of vitality is always a lie or at least a bright red herring: the paternal sun of the introduction, the eagles and "their native noon," and, as I will discuss in Section III, the "shape all light" only shelter "the sacred few" (352 [*SPP* 494]). We can hardly all be martyrs, and Shelley's speaker consistently refuses to go the way of Socrates or Jesus. Instead, the speaker attends to the disabling environments that grind people down with the relentless pace of Life, stopping not for "they of Athens and Jerusalem" but for the miserable cripple left behind by the perpetual parade, the withered corpse of "what was once Rousseau" (204 [489]).

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Rousseau's age and decay are not, then, just a quick and easy allegory of the corruption of his fiery, unorthodox, passionate, and revolutionary youth. Ultimately, there is no cure for age. An instructive adage of modern disability studies reminds us that if we live long enough, we will certainly become disabled ourselves. Shelley's complex conception of "perfect health," I contend, acknowledges this inconvenient truth and attempts to move beyond the limited language of cure. Bewell judiciously hints at this looming problem in his Shelley chapter but ultimately does not fully pursue it:

> Shelley's idea of a future world in which "Health floats amid the gentle atmosphere" (*Queen Mab* VIII.114) therefore should be seen as an early articulation of a profoundly modern stance toward the body and overall human health, one that has shaped the course of medicine. The cure has changed – from vegetarianism, to Beddoes's "pneumatics," to sanitation, to bacteriology, to antibiotics, to the mapping of genes – but the belief that disease can be completely controlled remains a deep, if frequently troubled, modern faith.[24]

In his search of the panacea that legitimized the "belief that disease can be completely controlled," Shelley himself, not just we moderns as Bewell notes, thoughtfully troubled his faith in total cures. Shelley's eager interest in the cures of vegetarianism and pneumatics was only part of his vision of "perfect health." The speaker of *The Triumph* stops for the withered Rousseau and not "the sacred few" because health is not wholly about loudly trumpeted cures but also about the low-level hum of care for and inclusion of aging, vulnerable, disabled, and debilitated bodies. The triumphal pageant, in which "Old age and youth, manhood and infancy, / Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear," demands more than a one-and-done, one-size-fits-all cure (52–53 [*SPP* 485]).

In Susan Wendell's intersectional feminist work, she speaks from both scholarly expertise and personal experience to show how uniform demands on the body and the strictly standardized pace of capitalist and industrial life have often been predicated on the normatively able-bodied subject. The idea of curing oneself into "perfect health," in other words, coercively shapes and enforces perfection from an exclusionary norm. A harmful social construction of disability assumes a kind of homogeneous temporality, and falling behind, as the old men and women of the triumphal pageant do, must be a sign of *im*perfect health, a measurable failure of productivity, value, and human flourishing. As Wendell explains, what we would now call ableist ideology emerges from these kinds of reflexive, unexamined assumptions:

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> The *pace of life* is a factor in the social construction of disability that particularly interests me, because it is usually taken for granted by non-disabled people, while many people with disabilities are acutely aware of how it marginalizes or threatens to marginalize us. I suspect that increases in the pace of life are important social causes of damage to people's bodies through rates of accident, drug and alcohol abuse, and illnesses that result from people's neglecting their needs for rest and good nutrition. But the pace of life also affects disability as a second form of social construction, the social construction of disability through expectations of performance.[25]

Wendell warns that even when "perfect health" is predicated on an ostensibly stable norm, standards can suddenly shift, and the pace of life can quickly hasten beyond bodily limitations, establishing "expectations of performance" that end up leaving everyone behind. Those ahead of the chariot dancing themselves into their sexual foam will eventually fall behind, and Shelleyan health eventually requires a more inclusive plan. Seth Reno has recently described this plan as Shelley's preference for "interconnectedness," what he identifies as "the predominant model (and sometimes metaphor) that Shelley uses to envision love."[26] What Reno describes as Shelley's interconnected love repeatedly redirects the speaker's dreaming eye away from the attractive *ignis fatuus* of the youth-renewing cure and toward the diligent care for disabled or contingently disabled bodies strewn along the path of Life's aging triumph. Shelley's speaker can only look to the triumph and march to Wendell's "*pace of life*," not to the impossible and cruel pace of martyred death. At this mature stage in his poetic career, Shelley warns against the ageist privileging of eternal youth over the decrepit corruption of old age; instead, his speaker continues to turn away from easy panaceas to attend to the disabled figures left behind. In this way, the *The Triumph* finally abandons the harmful language of cure to reevaluate and reconstruct the social models of "perfect health."

III Staring at Rousseau

Biblical psalms may have been the source for Shelley's youthful image of eagles returning "to their native noon," but William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" is probably the more proximate reference. Wordsworth's speaker begins wistfully that "There was a time when" he was more attuned to the textures of natural sublimity and more capable of youthful poetic reverie.[27] In the epigraph, Wordsworth cites his earlier work to proclaim that "The Child is father of the Man"; the pure joy of childhood experience serves as a chastising reminder for the corruptions and

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compromises of adulthood.[28] By the end of Wordsworth's first stanza, the speaker laments that age has robbed him of poetic vision: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more."[29] In an article that was perhaps the first to consider seriously the relation of Shelley's *The Triumph* to Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, John Hodgson spells out the structural similarity while pointing out the ideological difference: "Shelley's *The Triumph* relates to Wordsworth's *Intimations* Ode not only as a symbolic parallel but also as an eschatological inversion."[30] In Hodgson's view, Rousseau's tale of youthful energy sapped by the attritions of age parallels the journey of Wordsworth's speaker, but since Rousseau is telling his story posthumously, nothing can be done; the story is mere pessimistic eschatology. About a decade later, de Man pressed the connection even further and observed that Shelley's reference to the "Intimations" ode "has misled even the most attentive readers of *The Triumph of Life*."[31] In a reading not incompatible with Hodgson's, de Man distinguishes between Wordsworth's adult forgetfulness and Shelley's Rousseau: "this is precisely what the experience of forgetting, in *The Triumph of Life*, is not."[32] De Man goes on to explain that Rousseau is *not* forgetting "some previous condition" of idyllic youth; instead, "we have no assurance whatever that the forgotten ever existed."[33] In these readings of Rousseau's disfigurement, the speaker of *The Triumph* encounters the "old root" who has "fallen by the way side" of the triumphal pageant as an entirely tragic and abject figure that sets in motion Hodgson's pessimistic eschatology and de Man's quasi-nihilistic deconstruction (541 [*SPP* 500]).

When the speaker discovers Rousseau, then, the encounter would be nothing but what we would now call a gross-out scene. In the influential readings of Hodgson and de Man, the speaker stares down the void right in its frightening, disfigured, and disgusting face:

> I turned and knew
> (O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)
>
> That what I thought was an old root which grew
> To strange distortion out of the hill side
> Was indeed one of that deluded crew,
>
> And that the grass which methought hung so wide
> And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
> And that the holes it vainly sought to hide
>
> Were or had been eyes (180–188 [*SPP* 489])

What was once the Wordsworthian sublime of the natural landscape is here transformed by age into the sobering and disappointing body of

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Rousseau. What was perhaps a wondrous old root heroically hanging on to the hill side is no more than a withered human frame. What was perhaps a sprawling heath of weathered grass is no more than thinning and greying human hair. Rousseau himself knew to hide his disgusting shame as he tries in vain to cover the eyeless sockets from the speaker's penetrating stare. Even the starer himself feels the shame. In a parenthetical aside, the speaker can hardly stifle his *sotto voce* prayer for the withered husk of a once great philosopher: "O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!" The stare, it seems, has produced bad feelings all around. Rousseau is ashamed of his appearance, and the speaker is ashamed of his own thoughts.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's surprising but ultimately compelling thesis in *Staring: How We Look* (2009) helps to clarify this queasy encounter with the hollowed-out corpse of Rousseau. Staring, according to Garland-Thomson, is not always about the starer's imposition of dominant social protocols upon the stigmatized staree:

> The stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim […] At the heart of this [book's] anatomy [of staring] is the matter of appearance, of the ways we see each other and the ways we are seen. It unsettles common understandings that staring is rudeness, voyeurism, or surveillance or that starers are perpetrators and starees victims. Instead, this vivisection lays bare staring's generative potential.[34]

It is from this disability theoretical standpoint that I want to measure the "generative potential" of staring at the old, disabled body of Rousseau. This pivotal moment in *The Triumph* is neither Foucault's gaze ("an oppressive act of disciplinary looking") nor what we understand as proper or acceptable staring. "In acceptable staring," Garland-Thomson explains, "an appropriate viewer synthesizes visual apprehension into knowledge that benefits the knower in carrying out cultural requirements."[35] Acceptable staring induces a normative ethics; it is staring with a legitimate purpose.

Rather than this pragmatic lucidity of ethical didacticism, Shelley's staring speaker produces something stranger. There is little to learn from the wild gestures of shame that follow from staring and being stared at in *The Triumph*. Unlike the acceptable, ethical, political, and appropriate stare, Shelley's seems incredibly *in*appropriate. "Proper staring is decorous, selective looking, not just random gawking," Garland-Thomson explains.[36] In contrast, the speaker's encounter with Rousseau is more like what she calls "baroque staring," an uncontrollable "gawking" that

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> is flagrantly stimulus driven, the rogue looking that refuses to be corralled into acceptable attention […] Unconcerned with rationality, mastery, or coherence, baroque staring blatantly announces the states of being wonderstruck and confounded. It is gaping-mouthed, unapologetic staring.[37]

Even here, staring is not simply "rudeness, voyeurism, or surveillance"; the baroque stare's inappropriateness challenges notions of "rationality, mastery, or coherence." It is instead an "unrepentant abandonment to the unruly, to that which refuses to conform to the dominant order of knowledge."[38] The speaker's baroque stare willfully ignores the sublime beauty of the paternal and youth-renewing sun to stare at the "unruly" body of Rousseau (1–20 [*SPP* 483–484]; 128–137 [487]). Rather than build his revolutionary ideology from the intergenerational, superstar pair of Jesus and Socrates, the youthful speaker deliberately chooses a partner in the old, disabled ruins of what was once Rousseau.[39]

Like the speaker, Rousseau also turned away from conventionally nourishing sunlight to stare unapologetically at the dark travesties of Life. In one of the most enigmatic and frequently discussed images of *The Triumph*, Rousseau encounters "A shape all light" created from the perfect reflections that the "Sun's image radiantly intense / Burned on the waters of the well" (352, 345–346 [*SPP* 494]). Beautiful, attractive, and immortally youthful, the shape all light "forever seemed to sing / A silver music on the mossy lawn" while she gracefully enchanted the sublime natural landscape with easy forgetfulness (354–355 [494]). Just as the poem's first sun supposedly shines on "All flowers" and "all things," this shape is meant to embody "*all* light" (9 [483]; 16 [484]). That language of normative totality, however, has been this poem's consistent, disabling lie. The philosophical light of Rousseau's own mind is extinguished in favor of the universal enlightenment of the "shape all light." As he gazes upon her, he loses his own kindling light, "As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath / Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought, / Trampled its fires into the dust of death" (386–388 [484]). The competing fire of Rousseau's mind is snuffed out until before his sight "Burst a new Vision never seen before" (411 [496]). At the end, he becomes much more interested in the triumphal pageant of Life and stares baroquely at its cruder, wilder, and sadder action:

> From every form the beauty slowly waned,
>
> "From every firmest limb and fairest face
> The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left
> The action and the shape without the grace

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

"Of its last cub, glared ere it died (519–526 [499])

As the dominating light of "the fair shape waned in the coming light" (412 [496]), Rousseau could make out aging faces and weakening limbs. Eternal hope had faded into ephemeral desire. The shape all light has no answer to the speaker's final question to Rousseau – "Then, what is Life?" (544 [500]) – because she can only trample fiery thought into the embers of happy, ignorant dust. By the end of the poetic fragment, three suns have passed – the paternal sun of the introduction, the eagles' youth-renewing sun, and now the reflected sun of a shape all light – and all three times, Shelley directs us away from the deceiving light. Instead of gazing fondly at the warmly lit world of established religions and philosophies, *The Triumph* forces us to stare baroquely at age, debility, and disability to answer the speaker's final question. Together, Rousseau and the speaker, the unsacred, disabled mockery of "they of Athens and Jerusalem," would piece together in the unwritten tercets an intergenerational theory of truly embodied life.

IV OK Boomer

Recall that T. S. Eliot was much more skeptical of Shelley's enduring appeal. In Eliot's view, those unfinished lines in *The Triumph* could hardly make up for Shelley's radical, youthful verse; as a whole, Shelley's body of work was unsustainable, immoral, blasphemous, and a thoroughly inappropriate "companion of age." For Eliot, young and old are always at odds, but he may have sensed in *The Triumph* a maturing Shelley that developed more honest accounts of the embodied contingencies and disappointments of age. He predicted that had Shelley survived into artistic maturity, he would have started to take the biblical adage to heart: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."[40] Shelley died young, however, so Eliot is left only with disapproving hypotheticals:

> It is open to us to guess whether his mind would have matured too; certainly, in his last, and to mind greatest though unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*, there is evidence not only of better writing than in any previous long poem, but of greater wisdom […] There is a precision of image and an economy here that is new to Shelley. But so far as we can judge, he is never quite escaped from the tutelage of Godwin, even when he saw through the humbug as a man; and the weight of Mrs. Shelley must have been pretty heavy too.[41]

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The formal and technical aspects of *The Triumph* – "better writing" and "precision of image and economy" – show marked improvement, but what Eliot is really after is "greater wisdom" than unruly and unreadable long poems like *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound* could possibly allow. I disagree, of course, with this analysis of Shelley's earlier work, but this chapter's real interpretative departure from Eliot is about ideological influence: "the tutelage of Godwin" and "the weight of Mrs. Shelley." Presumably, what he means by this is what he calls the "humbug" of the radically optimistic doctrine of perfectibility and human immortality in William Godwin's *St. Leon* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.[42] With the grotesque parade of fragile human life in *The Triumph*, Eliot sees Shelley attempting but ultimately failing to get away from the puerile optimism of the Godwinian perfectibility of our mortal bodies. As I have argued, Shelley *does* dispense with his father-in-law's techno-optimistic promise of immortality – the gentle sun that eternally restores age into youth – but, in *The Triumph*, Shelley evolves Godwinian perfectibility into an intergenerational disability theory that can survive the *longue durée* of revolutionary time.

It may be tempting to imagine Shelley clapping back at Eliot's curmudgeonly analysis with an "OK boomer," but that is not quite right either. In a recent *New York Times* article, Taylor Lorenz uses the phrase to mark the end of polite and friendly conversations across generations. The phrase "has become Generation Z's endlessly repeated retort to the problem of older people who just don't get it, a rallying cry for millions of fed up kids."[43] Old age becomes inextricably tied up with climate change denial, systemic racism, casual misogyny, religious intolerance, and income inequality. What Shelley offers for this volume's "our times," then, is a path of de-escalation in this swelling generational conflict, most fully and complexly articulated in the disability theory of *The Triumph* as I have discussed but perhaps more compactly and didactically presented in his short prose fragment "The Coliseum." The scene begins with an old, blind man and his daughter Helen visiting the ruins of the Coliseum when everyone else is busy commemorating the feast of Passover. An eccentric, emaciated, and iconoclastic youth wearing an ancient chlamys – a clear portrait of Shelley himself – barges into the scene, calls him a "wretched old man,"[44] and accuses him of not being able to understand the true sublimity of the sight of ruins before him.[45] This knee-jerk charge of "OK boomer," however, results in a cringey comeuppance. Little does the brash youth know, the old man is blind and depends on his daughter's sighted descriptions to engage with the colossal ruins.[46] Kevin Binfield has read this as Shelley's expanding intergenerational vision that develops "an awareness of the life

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beyond the narrow circle of self"[47] and finally "permits a link between generations."[48] Cian Duffy has read it in the terms of the unresolved clash between old-fashioned reform and youthful revolution.[49] Shelley's point is that charging in with the ableist and ageist "OK boomer" on our lips short-circuits any generative discussion of human progress and perfectibility.

Like *The Triumph*, "The Coliseum" is unfinished but leaves off with the promise of mutual education between old and young, Rousseau and the dreaming poet, the blind old man and the chlamys-clad revolutionary. The young man would explain his iconoclastic dress, his budding anarchism, and his radical atheism while the old man would expand on his aesthetic theory of the nonvisual sublime. Rather than blustering into the scene with accusations of obsolete superstition and dynastic corruption, Shelley has youthful radicalism trip upon the figure of disability. The fragment is most clearly a riff on the opening scene of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, but whereas Oedipus, accompanied by his daughter Antigone, quickly declares his blindness to the stranger to avoid misunderstanding, the young stranger in "The Coliseum" suffers an egregious blunder. Shelley strategically restages this classical scene as an awkward but instructive encounter. Shelley deliberately stops for the old, blind man in "The Coliseum" and the "cripple" Rousseau in *The Triumph*. In this way, Shelley shies away from grand, pragmatic politics of reform or revolution, recommending instead a more modest intergenerational coalition that can abide both the quake of violent revolution and the rumble of incremental reform. Much has changed in the two centuries since Shelley's death, and we are tasked in this volume with the difficult question of Shelley's place in our updated and decolonized syllabi. In many ways, we are only just learning ourselves how to take disability theory and disability history seriously, and I would argue that Shelley's work teaches us how to slow down, stop, and stare at the baroque figures of age, debility, and disability. With Shelley, we learn that the coming revolution must be at once young and old, firm and infirm, able-bodied and disabled.

Notes

1 Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, Volume 11 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 327.
2 Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works*, 80.
3 Paul Foot's "red Shelley," the revolutionary poet who strove to better the world, is, according to his celebratory account, "not even primarily a man's poet." Foot claims that, in both theory and practice, Shelley was undeniably a feminist who "was writing for women as few other male poets have written in the English

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language." See Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 159. Anne K. Mellor, however, is more skeptical. In her account, Shelley's construction of the woman-as-lover merely "effaces her into a narcissistic projection of his own self," *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25.

4 For a comprehensive and compelling account of Shelley's lifelong struggle with illness, especially venereal disease – either real or imagined – see Nora Crook and Derek Guiton's *Shelley's Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Rousseau's own experience with venereal disease was a stumbling block for his idealist philosophy of love and left him "polarised between elusive, disembodied beauty and predatory sensualism." In *Triumph*, Crook and Guiton argue that Shelley is deliberately "identifying himself with a morally flawed poet (Rousseau)." See Crook and Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Malady*, 225, 229.

5 John A. Hodgson, "The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*," *ELH* 42.4 (1975), 595–622, 595.

6 This essay depends on the close connection between age and disability. Thanks to the pioneering work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, this connection is now a critical commonplace in the field of disability studies. As I explain later in the essay, the instructive adage is that if we live long enough into old age, we will all eventually become disabled.

7 Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 209.

8 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 241

9 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 209.

10 This cursory summary suffices for my reading of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*. For a much more robust account of the social model of disability, however, including its history, its positive impacts, and its limitations, see Tom Shakespeare's *Disability: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018), especially the first chapter, "Understanding Disability," 1–23. Shakespeare's book provides an eminently lucid and accessible introduction to the key debates in disability studies, including the social model.

11 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 219.

12 Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 93–123, 122.

13 In Paul de Man's readings of the rhetoric of Romanticism, he frequently uses the figure of disability to signify hermeneutic ruptures in our reading practices. In his Shelley essay, reading is a form of disfiguring, and autobiography is a form of defacement. In his analysis of Wordsworth, he pays special attention to deaf and mute characters: "But the question remains how this near-obsessive concern with mutilation, often in the form of a loss of one of the senses, as blindness, deafness, or, as in the key word of the Boy of Winander, *muteness*, is to be understood and, consequently, how trustworthy the ensuing claim of compensation and restoration can be" (Paul de Man, "Autobiography As De-facement," in de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 73–74). He questions, in other words, how Wordsworth can possibly view disability as anything other than loss and "mutilation."

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14 Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 178.
15 Stuart M. Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 200.
16 Paul Foot, *Red Shelley*, 167.
17 Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.
18 Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 411.
19 Crook and Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, 230.
20 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 205.
21 That eagles stare into and fly toward the sun to renew their youth is most likely a biblical reference: "[The Lord] satisfieth thy mouth with good *things*; *so that* thy youth is renewed like the eagle's." Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds. Psalm 103.5, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 696. What is interesting in Shelley's simile, however, is that this renewal of youth is reserved specifically for Jesus and not for the inclusive, second-person "thy" of the biblical passage. For everyone else, the swindle of immortal youth and vitality is a "maniac dance" alongside the triumphal pageant of Life (110 [*SPP* 487]).
22 In his account of Shelley's death, Edward Trelawny initially recognized his friend's attire on the washed-up body but could only confirm Shelley's identity beyond a doubt when he saw the open volume of John Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). Included with the three long narrative poems explicitly named in the title were several shorter poems, including the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in Elizabeth Cook, ed. *John Keats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), 288–289, ll. 26–27.
23 Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," l. 45.
24 Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 206.
25 Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 37, emphasis in original.
26 Seth T. Reno, *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788–1853* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 114.
27 William Wordsworth, "Ode (There Was a Time)," in Stephen Gill, ed. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works Including The Prelude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 297–302, l. 1.
28 Wordsworth, William, "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold," in *The Major Works*, 246, l. 7.
29 Wordsworth, "Ode," l. 9.
30 Hodgson, "The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*," 607.
31 De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," 104.
32 De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," 104.
33 De Man, "Shelley Disfigured," 104.

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34 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9–10.
35 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 50.
36 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 50.
37 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 50.
38 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 50.
39 Here, I am implying that the speaker is at least a partial stand-in for Shelley himself. At the time of their martyrdoms, Jesus was in his early thirties and Socrates in his early seventies. Similarly, Shelley/the speaker would be approaching thirty while Rousseau died a few years shy of seventy. The poem's "baroque" pairing of the speaker and Rousseau is in many ways a pale and deliberately messy imitation of Jesus and Socrates, "the sacred few."
40 T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 218.
41 Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 81.
42 *Frankenstein* is a very different novel from *St. Leon*, and Eliot's conflation of Mary Shelley and William Godwin is misleading. Here, it will just suffice to say that *Frankenstein* critiques the singular quest for technological immortality while *St. Leon* is more ambivalent.
43 Taylor Lorenz, "'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations," *New York Times*, October 29, 2019, par. 2. www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/ok-boomer.html?smid=url-share.
44 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press 2002), 272.
45 I defer to Stephen Behrendt's analysis here for this clarity about Shelley's self-portrait. Behrendt cites Thomas Medwin's commentary, the character's exquisite grace, his sickliness, and his androgynous features to argue for the correspondence between character and author. Stephen C. Behrendt, "'His Left Hand Held the Lyre': Shelley's Narrative Fiction Fragments," in Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb, eds. *The Neglected Shelley* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 95–116, 104.
46 Shelley, *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, 272–273.
47 Kevin Binfield, "'May They Be Divided Never': Ethics, History, and the Rhetorical Imagination in Shelley's 'The Coliseum,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 46 (1997), 124–147, 129.
48 Binfield, "Ethics, History, and the Rhetorical Imagination in Shelley's 'The Coliseum'," 146.
49 Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 164–166.

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