**The Heart’s Echoes: A Lecture to the London Shelley Conference, September 2017**

In a recent essay, Timothy Morton notes how the tropes and topics of *Queen Mab* are elaborated and repeated throughout Shelley’s career. That’s true. He prefaces the point as follows: ‘Who, on average, changes that much between the ages of 19 and 30 (when Shelley drowned)?’[[1]](#footnote--1) My first response to that rhetorical question is, most people change an awful lot between 19 and 30. But it’s an interesting question in Shelley’s case. The early intellectual fearlessness, the fiercely radical personal independence, and recklessness, was progressively chastened and quietened. It was chastened by the dreadful events of late 1816, the suicides of Fanny Imlay and Harriet Shelley; by the sense of personal and artistic failure growing by steady increments thereafter, reinforced especially after the deaths of Clara and William, and the growing estrangement from Mary; health worries; the repeated disappointments of the reception of his work, not least in contrast with Byron; and the vexing matter of his relationships with other women, and especially with Jane Williams in the last months. At the same time his sense of humour becomes ever more apparent, and more engaging, and a sort of wry self-awareness and even self-mockery come through, stronger with each passing month. In the final weeks we find him joking with Leigh Hunt about turning for comfort to veal-cutlets.[[2]](#footnote-0)

He was only 29 when he died. Studying any period in his last ten years, that often seems almost incredible. There’s a distinctive Shelleyan intensity of intellectual engagement, constantly driving on through new reading, new languages, new thinkers, new writing, and indeed new personal turmoil, all of it in a process of immensely complex consolidation with what’s gone before, the journeys that his mind had already been on overlaying or underpinning each new departure. Shelley is a difficult writer to study, because of the challenge presented by the tireless energy of his intellectual seriousness. No matter which period or moment in that brief ten years comes into focus, there seems more going on, in reach of knowledge and understanding, than can easily be quantified, let alone fixed in decisive analysis. There aren’t many English poets who offer that kind of challenge. The perpetual change makes it all but impossible to locate intellectual or artistic commitments and think of them as settled.

But bound up with that unceasing intellectual development, Tim Morton is right to discern a certain continuity. Shelley’s past seems forever to be catching up with him. There is the recurring scenario of a mysterious assailant. There is his conviction of unflagging pursuit by agents of his deepest enemies, his father, Eliza Westbrooke. There are the recurring medical problems, the sad entanglements with terrible outcomes, involving children and lovers. Similar scenarios are re-enacted with varied elements, different people, places, plot elements.

The onward rush of Shelley’s life is characterised by elements that repeat, echoingly. The notion of repetition indeed is something that knits together the forward narrative, inviting comparison between moments, bringing a paradoxical stillness to the continuous rapid movement. His poetry is itself like that, not least in its most purely formal characteristics. *The* *Triumph of Life* is structurally a series of visions, similar in character and narrative, each one nested within the vision preceding, such that each new phase in the narrative turns out a fresh rehearsal of what has already happened. The terza rima continually reinforces the effect, each tercet a split couplet that takes off from the middle rhyme of the tercet preceding, and itself introducing a new rhyme element to be taken up in the tercet following. The endless echoing variation within repetition of poetic rhyme, is, of course, a peculiar strength in Shelley’s poetry. Take the case of ‘The Cloud’ from the 1820 volume, an exhilarated celebration of perpetual self-renewal and self-invention within a repeating cycle. ‘The Cloud’ has 84 lines in 6 stanzas, the first and last stanzas each of 12 lines, the second of 18, and the other three all of 14 lines; a shape prompting us to speculate that symmetry is posited only to be avoided. In that as in other formal respects ‘The Cloud’, like so many of Shelley’s lyrics, never seems to settle to the discipline that nevertheless makes it possible. This is the fourth stanza:

That òrbed maiden with white fire laden,

 Whom mortals call the moon,

Glides glimmering o’er my fleecelike floor,

 By the midnight breezes strewn;

And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,

 Which only the angels hear,

May have broken the woof of my tent’s thin roof,

 The stars peep behind her, and peer;

And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,

 Like a swarm of golden bees,

When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,

 Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,

Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,

 Are each paved with the moon and these. (ll. 45-58)[[3]](#footnote-1)

The overall movement drives forward through an underlying anapaestic beat in alternating long and shorter lines, though here as throughout the poem the alternation is ceaselessly various, with longer lines ranging between 12 and 9 (or in one case 8) syllables, and the shorter lines varying between 9 and 6 syllables. One is tempted to say that the line-lengths are overdetermined by a basic pattern of strong stresses, alternating 4 and 3, suggesting Coleridge’s metrical experiment in *Christabel*. But like the syllable counts, that pattern of alternating 4 and 3 stresses is itself subject to so much variation that it amounts to a formal principle present only as it may be extrapolated from what actually happens or exists; like Shelley’s concept of an Intellectual Beauty, or a power in nature, or in history, nowhere directly apprehended, but inferrable as the moving cause of what is present to the senses. The anapaestic movement of ‘The Cloud’, disturbed by numerous substituted feet, shortened lines, and additional unstressed final syllables, is in the stanza just quoted characterised additionally by a sequence of lines ending with clusters of three strong stresses, ‘white fire laden’, ‘fleece-like floor’, ‘unseen feet’, ‘tent’s thin roof’, and ‘wind-built tent’. To characterise the rhythmic effect one almost reaches for a jazz analogy, as of a drummer running elaborately syncopated beats against, but also compatible with the implied time signature.

‘The Cloud’ also offers the Shelleyan challenge of formal complexity combined with fast movement, and intricate lines of thought and reference articulated through multiple metaphors and vibrant visual detail. Most remarkably typical of all is the controlled fluency, giving a kind of headlong glee in the Cloud’s self-celebrating self-description, which through the brilliance of the writing of course becomes at the same time a self-celebrating self-description of the poetry, and its poet.

The brilliance is partly made out of echoes. Echoes of poetic commonplaces, mainly classical, touched just glancingly – cumulus clouds as fleece, the sky mirrored in still water,[[4]](#footnote-2) — and quasi-scientific detail – the moon is white because it has no atmosphere to refract light – invite us to pause on an allusion or a reference, to some thing or some thought preceding or outside the verse itself, even as we are rushed on by the intricate fast play of the rhythm against that elusively shifting metrical pattern. The actual meaning can seem all but subordinated to the spectacularly fluent rhyming. The rhymes are extraordinary in this poem. Through each of the stanzas, varying as they do in length, the pattern is an alternation between odd-numbered lines rhyming only internally, not with any other line, and even-numbered lines that rhyme with perfect consistency in successive pairs, or sometimes triplets. The headlong and exuberant freedom with which Shelley negotiates that discipline makes for a most beautiful effect of complexity effortlessly mastered. Another concurrent dimension of that mastery is in Shelley’s syntax. Threading perilously through the length of the packed sentence filling all 14 lines of the quoted stanza, it brings us up short with the final pronoun ‘these’. Its fugitive referent needs the pause afforded by the stanza break, so that we can gather it is the ‘strips of the sky’ reflected, like the moon, in the still waters of earth.

Those ‘strips of the sky’ that the cloud describes as ‘fallen through me’ are sharply observed, areas of starry sky among moving broken cloud that reflect on the calm surface of the sea. But equally typical is the familiarity of that image. It connects with a passage in the ‘Ode to Liberty’ — an adjacent poem in the 1820 volume — where the image of ancient Athens is reflected ‘Within the surface of Time’s fleeting river’ (l. 76). Those lines themselves rework at least two other draft fragments, including the beautiful lines that Mary titled ‘Evening. Ponte a Mare, Pisa’. The image of sky reflected in water, phrased to suggest the created effect of a perfected version of overcanopying reality, goes back to Lucretius, and there are a number of contemporary poetic instances that were well-known to Shelley, in Wordsworth for example, and Southey.[[5]](#footnote-3) It represents one instance of Shelley’s ubiquitous tendency to return, again and again, to certain poetic conceptions, images, ideas, and specific words with a symbolic charge. This quality knits together all of the output from *Queen Mab* to the *Triumph of Life*. Amongst the papers that Geoffrey Matthews left behind after his sudden death was a notebook containing his work on what was effectively to be a glossary of this recurring symbolic language in Shelley’s poetry. It testifies powerfully to the persisting consistency of a wide variety of symbols and ideas. Geoffrey had the intention of publishing an appendix to the Longman edition, and indeed his work on that appendix proved one of the many obstacles to his completing work on the whole edition, as the list of symbols and their associated vocabulary grew ever longer

That vision of a world purified and perfected in its reflection recurs in the last phase of Shelley’s career:

We paused beside the pools that lie

 Under the forest bough —

 Each seemed as ’twere, a little sky

 Gulfed in a world below;

A firmament of purple light

 Which in the dark earth lay

More boundless than the depth of night

 And purer than the day,

In which the lovely forests grew

 As in the upper air,

More perfect, both in shape and hue,

 Than any spreading there;

 There lay the glade, the neighbouring lawn,

 And through the dark green wood

The white sun twinkling like the dawn

 Out of a speckled cloud.

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Sweet views, which in our world above

 Can never well be seen

Were imaged in the water’s love

 Of that fair forest green;

And all was interfused beneath

 With an Elysian glow,

 An atmosphere without a breath,

 A softer day below —

Like one beloved, the scene had lent

 To the dark water’s breast,

Its every leaf and lineament

 With more than truth expressed;

Until an envious wind crept by,

 Like an unwelcome thought

Which from the mind’s too faithful eye

 Blots one dear image out. — (ll. 53-84)[[6]](#footnote-4)

These lines, from ‘To Jane. The Recollection’, embody much of what characterises the poems to Jane Williams. The thought is deceptively involved, carried as it is in that calm voice, at once intimately personal and dreamily abstracted, where the challenge of the metre and the quatrain rhymes are met with a relaxed certainty, a subtle mix of varied pauses and run-on lines that makes speaking in verse seem more natural than speaking in prose. And yet the image itself is hard to grasp. The water is in love with what it reflects, and that is why the image it carries seems perfected: ‘Like one beloved, the scene had lent/To the dark water’s breast,/Its every leaf and lineament/With more than truth expressed’. The obliquity of this reference to Shelley’s feelings for Jane is matched by the veiled reference to Mary’s shadowing presence on the walk commemorated in the poem, where the idealising image is broken up by ripples from ‘an envious wind’. In the period towards the end of his residence in Pisa, with its tight community starting to break up under the pressure of fraught relations and re-emerging tragedies, Shelley seems to have come increasingly to try and find a measure of calm, even happiness, by thinking of his experience as confined to the present moment, looking neither back nor to the future, islanded in the moment. In March 1822 he wrote to Claire Clairmont, seeking to comfort her agonies of anxiety about her daughter Allegra, shut up in a convent by her father Byron, by urging her to ‘give up this idle pursuit after shadows, & temper yourself to the season; seek in the daily & affectionate intercourse of friends a respite from these perpetual & irritating projects. Live from day to day, attend to your health, cultivate literature & liberal ideas to a certain extent & expect that from time & change which no exertions of your own can give you’ (*Letters* ii 400). In another letter he advised her ‘to think and act without a plan, and let the world pass’ (*Letters* ii 402). And yet these longed-for islands of serenity in a sea of troubles again strike us as familiar. There are the repetitions of personal circumstance, the turn from Mary to another woman, an alternative reality that seems half flesh, half embodied ideal. And it is not simply images and ideas which repeat, but also their poetic expression. The metres of the poems to Jane Williams are clearly influenced by Shelley’s current reading in 1822, the songs from *The Tempest* together with Prospero’s Epilogue, the Spirits’ speeches in *Comus*, and Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poets such as Drayton and Herrick. But there are echoes of earlier Shelleyan metres as well, notably the seven-syllable movement of ‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’, with its corresponding yearning for islands of refuge in the wide sea of misery. That metre suggests other couplet or quatrain rhymed short lines that we recall from *Prometheus Unbound*, the ‘Stanzas written in Dejection, near Naples’, and the lines that Medwin titled ‘Invocation to Misery’.

There is what one might characterise as a multi-stranded thread of continuities which inhabit successive forms in Shelley’s unfolding development as a poet. It is the expressive counterpart of his abiding interest in the notion of a higher reality transmitted through forms which are themselves impermanent. The interest takes many forms. There is for example the phrase ‘pure anticipated cognition’, that crops up several times over a number of years in different contexts, and perhaps most famously in Shelley’s own playful note to *Peter Bell the Third*. ‘Pure anticipated cognition’, as Jack Donovan explains, is a phrase that identifies a fundamental principle of Emmanuel Kant’s metaphysics, that the mind possesses certain kinds of knowledge independently of any direct experience of the phenomena from which that knowledge might appear to derive. Shelley would have come across it early, in Sir William Drummond’s *Academical Questions*, where the phrase is used in the context of an attack on Kant’s unChristian theories. The idea of a ‘pure anticipated cognition’ seems to have been some kind of standing joke among Shelley’s friends, notably Peacock, who uses it in his portraits of Shelley in *Melincourt* and *Nightmare Abbey*. [[7]](#footnote-5) There’s a good discussion of it in Hugh Roberts’s book *Shelley and the Chaos of History*.[[8]](#footnote-6) It’s important to register the playful nature of Shelley’s use of the phrase, because particularly in his later years all philosophical positions are best understood as material for metaphor rather than credos of belief. Shelley wrote in a letter to Leigh Hunt of June 1822 that he thought Jane Williams, by now ‘a most delightful person’, was such an exact antitype of the Lady described in ‘The Sensitive-Plant’ that the character in that poem must have been ‘a pure anticipated cognition’ of Jane, as the poem was written a year before he met her; although in fact Medwin had described her in a letter predating the composition of ‘The Sensitive-Plant’ so Shelley may have been unconsciously influenced by that.[[9]](#footnote-7) The interesting thing is Shelley’s easy assumption that actual experience, material reality, living persons in time, could be thought of as the vehicles of a transcendent reality not directly knowable, but inferrable from consciousness. There’s a curious remark in one of his letters to John Gisborne which bears on this habit of mind in Shelley, when, speaking of his immersion in ‘the Greek dramatists & Plato’, he writes ‘Some of us have in a prior existence been in love with an Antigone, & that makes us find no full content in any mortal tie’ (*Letters* ii 364). This remark from October of 1821 takes us right back to Shelley’s Oxford days, when according to Hogg he stopped a woman with a child in her arms on Magdalen Bridge and said to her ‘Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, Madam?’.[[10]](#footnote-8) As Hogg tells the story Shelley is as usual made to look ridiculous, but there is presumably some kernel of truth in Hogg’s recollection, which goes on to have Shelley say that ‘all knowledge is reminiscence’, a doctrine ‘more ancient than the times of Plato’. Shelley’s interest in Pythagoreanism and its Platonic and neo-Platonic adaptations is well-attested. Plato’s doctrine of recollection argued that things perceived through our senses remind us of things we knew before birth, when the soul was out of the body and could perceive things directly. It is thus from recollection that we derive our intuition of the beautiful and the good, and this concept of a higher experience cloudily mediated for living beings leads to the related concept of metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls.[[11]](#footnote-9) A passing mention in Medwin’s *Conversations of Lord Byron* is one of many confirmations that metempsychosis was a preoccupation for Shelley. Medwin reports Byron defending the Catholic idea of Purgatory to Shelley as ‘a comfortable doctrine’, and then saying ‘It is an improvement on the transmigration, Shelley, which all your wiseacre philosophers taught’.[[12]](#footnote-10) Medwin of course is no more reliable than Hogg, but there seems no reason for him to have invented what must have been a frequent topic. In neo-Platonists such as Porphyry, building on Platonic arguments in the *Republic*, the *Meno*, and the *Phaedrus*, the doctrine of transmigration was developed to include the idea that we, and indeed the whole world, will be reborn into lives that are exactly the same as those we are now living and have already lived. After certain periods of time the things that have happened once happen again, and nothing is ever absolutely new. We recognise the ideas as lying behind one of Shelley’s greatest lyric passages, in *Hellas*:

 Worlds on worlds are rolling ever

 From creation to decay,

 Like the bubbles on a river

 Sparkling, bursting, borne away.

 But they are still immortal

 Who, through birth’s orient portal

And death’s dark chasm hurrying to and fro,

 Clothe their unceasing flight

 In the brief dust and light

Gather’d around their chariots as they go;

 New shapes they still may weave,

 New Gods, new laws receive,

Bright or dim are they, as the robes they last

 On Death’s bare ribs had cast. (ll. 197-210)

I think we should understand the thought here as a complement to the central idea of *Adonais*. The successive generations of human intellect confer a kind of immortality on poets, in Shelley’s inclusive sense in the *Defence of Poetry*, comprising creative intellect in all its forms, by continually bringing back to affective life their achievements. This constant revivification of mind as it hurries from successive births to deaths, weaving new shapes, can be celebrated, as in *Hellas*, or it can take a sceptical turn, as it does at the end of *Hellas*, and as it had previously done at the end of *Prometheus Unbound*, where the closing speech concedes that the endlessly cyclic character of human history will return the bad along with the good.

Shelley of course didn’t know that the early months of 1822 were to be his last. Indeed the circumstance of his sudden accidental death poses peculiar difficulties in scholarly efforts to characterise his state of mind in 1822, as the fixity imposed by closure belies the rapid changes happening in his work, and his personal life, at that time. Who knows what turn things might have taken had he returned safely to Casa Magni in the middle of July, where Mary, and Jane Williams, were waiting for him? Certainly, his past selves were haunting him. *Queen Mab* was pirated by William Clarke in 1821. Shelley described it in a letter to his publisher in June 1821 as ‘a poem I wrote in early youth’, recollecting it as ‘villainous trash’ (*Letters* ii 298) This tone was no doubt intended to put distance between his present self and the potentially dangerous legal consequences of being held responsible for the new edition. The ‘early youth’ obscures the fact that *Queen Mab* had been published only eight years previously, which reminds us how extraordinarily telescoped was Shelley’s career, all of it crammed into less than a decade. All kinds of echoes will have been sounding for him in the spring of 1822, with the imminent arrival of Leigh Hunt, the expected delivery of his library, the conflicted intimacy with Byron, calling back the summer of 1816, the autumn of 1818. The Williams’s children, a little boy and a baby girl, must have brought bitter memories as they played with the toddler Percy Florence. The word ‘echoes’ itself echoes through his writing of this period. It finds an elusively subtle inflection in ‘When the lamp is shattered’, where it contributes to a desolate melancholy in the expression of a love which has survived the extinction or removal of its stimulus:

 When the lamp is shattered

The light in the dust lies dead —

 When the cloud is scattered

The rainbow’s glory is shed —

 When the lute is broken

Sweet tones are remembered not —

 When the lips have spoken

Loved accents are soon forgot.

 As music and splendour

 Survive not the lamp and the lute,

 The heart’s echoes render

No song when the spirit is mute —

 No song — but sad dirges

Like the wind through a ruined cell

 Or the mournful surges

That ring the dead seaman’s knell.

 Where hearts have once mingled

Love first leaves the well-built nest —

 The weak one is singled

20 To endure what it once possessed.

 O Love! who bewailest

The frailty of all things here,

 Why choose you the frailest

For your cradle, your home and your bier?

25 Its passions will rock thee

As the storms rock the ravens on high —

 Bright Reason will mock thee

Like the Sun from a wintry sky —

 From thy nest every rafter

30 Will rot, and thine eagle home

 Leave thee naked to laughter

When leaves fall and cold winds come.[[13]](#footnote-11)

The series of parallel statements seems to offer a structural symmetry which suggests something like formal logic, a clear-headedness reinforced by emphatic metrical regularity and strong rhymes. But this syllogistic clarity is completely undercut by the actual obscurity of the formulations, with their ambivalent syntax and opaque similitudes. This effect deepens in the third stanza, where tenor and vehicle become tangled, and the grammar ambiguous, like someone struggling to keep a coherent argument going while breaking down emotionally. The effect is of a voice fighting to sound rational while betraying profound upset and distress, and anticipates the move back into bleak clarity in the final stanza, where ‘Bright Reason will mock thee/Like the Sun from a wintry sky’. What makes the poem so distinctively Shelleyan is its achievement in expressing emotional desolation verging on collapse, with an ironically contrastive confidence and certainty in formal artistry.

The sadness of a love that survives the extinction of its stimulus is a preoccupation of the late work known as the ‘Fragments of an Unfinished Drama’. It is another work full of echoes, an example of new writing drawing on earlier work, earlier poetic conceptions and ideas, past experience. In the last 130 lines of the ‘Unfinished Drama’, nearly one half of the surviving draft, there is an account of a dream in which a child-like spirit emerges from a meteor and places a seed in soil within a pot. On waking the dreamer discovers a new plant sprouting among her indoor plants, and recounts its growth over the days and weeks, as winter turns to Spring, into a gourd-like plant that spreads through a window and across a lawn to the margins of a pool. Clearly the episode is symbolic, if obscurely so. The narrative of a plant nurtured carefully to health through winter to spring had already been developed, in another fragmentary and unfinished poem, ‘The Zucca’, drafted probably three or four months earlier. ‘The Zucca’ reinforces Shelley’s recurring self-identification with vulnerable or blighted plants or flowers, which lies in part behind the conception of ‘The Sensitive-Plant’, written some two years earlier. He appears to have imaged his own condition, with its persisting health problems he and others considered serious, and constant emotional buffetings, in that of an ailing plant which could nevertheless be nursed back to vigorous health and new growth through the attentions of an attentive gardener. In both ‘The Zucca’ and the ‘Unfinished Drama’ a potentially blighted plant survives and flourishes through the attentions of a female gardener, who plays music to encourage the plant. We know that Jane Williams was a keen gardener, and she was of course also a notably accomplished musician and singer, so there seems little doubt that the evolving relationship with her was, if not the literal referent, then certainly a driving force in Shelley’s workings and reworkings of the plant narrative.

The ‘Unfinished Drama’ is a puzzling and difficult work. Shelley was working on it in April 1822 during the last weeks in Pisa, three months before he drowned. It was conceived for performance by his immediate Pisan circle: himself, together with Mary, Edward and Jane Williams, and Edward Trelawny. All that survives are three roughly drafted passages, parts of which were first published in *Posthumous Poems* in 1824. Mary published a longer version in 1839, and then twenty years later Richard Garnett in *Relics of Shelley* published a further passage under the title ‘The Magic Plant’, corresponding to the passage I’ve just been discussing. The whole drama, so far as it survives in a single relatively continuous rough draft in one of Shelley’s notebooks, was put together and published by William Michael Rossetti in 1870, although his ordering of lines and passages is very confused and consequently very confusing for readers. Thomas Hutchinson’s Oxford edition of 1904 was closely based on Rossetti, and Geoffrey Matthews’s revision of Hutchinson left the text untouched. It is the most substantial work by Shelley which still awaits a reliable edition, although brilliant work by Tim Webb and Nora Crook has paved the way for one.[[14]](#footnote-12)

The manuscript of the ‘Unfinished Drama’ is often clear and easy to follow, but a fair proportion is difficult rough draft with challenging cancellation, overwriting, unresolved alternate readings, and illegibility. Several pages bear marginal marks obviously indicating proposed or alternative insertion points for passages of draft which are not in the actual page sequence of the notebook, or possibly not in the notebook at all but in other notebooks or loose sheets, now lost or unidentified. It is hard to decide, not just how individual lines might best be rendered by an editor, but in what order they are meant to be read. The task is made harder still because the longest section, a dialogue between two characters, is in blank verse, so there is no stanza shape or rhyme to serve as a guide. A further complicating factor is that the manuscript does not name the characters, and there is a complete absence of speaker attributions. As with other of Shelley’s drafts for dramas, including the translations from Calderón and Goethe, and the original writing for ‘Charles the First’, a change of speaker is often represented simply by a dash, and sometimes also by the positioning of text on the page, for example to represent a metrical line divided among more than one speaker. This is why various speeches are attributed to different characters in different editions.

This textual situation is complemented by a comparably bewildering set of questions relating to the plot of the *Unfinished Drama*, and to the nature and meaning of its dialogue and action. Mary Shelley offered a plot summary when she published the fragments, but, as Rossetti noticed, it doesn’t square with what appears to be going on in what survives of the drama. In the longest surviving scene two characters, a young man and a woman, are engaged in enigmatic conversation. The strangeness of their dramatic situation, or rather the difficulty of establishing the dramatic situation through the combination of its inexplicit strangeness with its textual incompleteness, makes for an effect of obscured brilliance that has affinities with ‘The Triumph of Life’. So far as one can surmise, the two are caught up in a complex set of love-relationships which one might try to unravel as follows. The woman has arrived on an ‘island of the Indian archipelago’, where according to Mary Shelley the action is set, having been abandoned by her lover. But, as well as having been abandoned, she appears herself to have abandoned, before arriving on the island, a youth who was in love with her. She is, to quote from her own account of her situation, ‘abandoned, and abandoning’. At various points in her narrative, the youth who has joined her on the island seems to recognise his own experience in what she says; that’s to say, he has been abandoned by a woman he loved, who herself had been abandoned by a lover. According to Mary’s plot summary another of the characters, an Enchantress, has also been abandoned by her lover, a pirate, and we can square that plot with the two-stanza lyric which opens the ‘Unfinished Drama’, spoken by the Enchantress. So the play as it survives has three characters, each one of them suffering from having been abandoned by a lover, and all sharing affinities of experience wherein the pain of being left connects with the suffering of leaving someone who loves them. Consider the following exchange:

Why must I think how we two sate together

Under the green pavilion which the willow

 Spreads on the floor of the unbroken fountain

Strewn by the riversprings [that] linger there

While musk-rose leaves like flakes of crimson snow

Showered on us, and the dove mourned in the pines,

Sad prophetess of sorrow not her own.

 Over that islet paved with flowers and moss

As soft and sweet as thoughts that die while they

May be renewed forever —

*Indian Youth*

 God of Heavens!

 From such an islet, such a river-spring…

 I dare not ask her if there stood upon it

 A pleasure-dome surmounted by a crescent,

With steps to the blue water — it may be

That Nature moulds in life several copies

Of the same lot —

*Zelica*

 So that the sufferers

May feel another’s sorrow in their own —

*Indian Youth*

 And find in friendship what they lost in love?

*Zelica*

 That cannot be. (ll. 63-81)

The scene recalled by the lady appears familiar to the youth, who ‘dare not ask her’ if other details in his own past experience might confirm that they have both been in the same past situation, and in the same place. It prompts him to wonder out loud whether there might be some power in Nature that ‘moulds in life several copies / Of the same lot’, a thought completed by the woman with the speculation that the purpose of such replication of experience between apparent strangers might be to provide comfort, and a surrogate in friendship, for lost love: ‘So that the sufferers / May feel another’s sorrow in their own’. The youth attempts to complete this thought by pointing its possible relevance to their own situation: ‘And find in friendship what they lost in love?’ To which the lady (‘Zelica’) replies ‘That cannot be’. I think she says that because, as the scene progresses, it seems clear that there is a strange ambivalence about this replication of love-relationship, in that it appears a possibility in the mind of the youth, but not of the lady, that their situations may not only be similar, but identical; that is to say, that he is the youth abandoned by the woman with whom he is talking on the island. Later in the scene, the youth, having once again recognised that his situation may not be simply similar to the woman’s story, but the very same story, reflects bitterly on the pervasive congruence between human love affairs:

One curse of nature stamps in the same mould

 The [fortunes of] the wretched, and they are

[The same sad piece by many actors played,]

As like as violet to violet,

Among spring flowers that fade in midsummer,

When memory, the ghost, their odour keeps

 Mid its cold relics of abandoned joy. (ll. 139-45)

This is beautifully representative of Shelley’s style in his last months. The familiar rapidity of movement and luxuriant proliferating metaphors have a kind of chastened clarity, a subdued melancholy, a new sense of sobering realities met by the wry recognition of limitations and disappointed aspiration.

There is that word ‘abandoned’ again, in a subtle figure likening the memory of lost love to the lingering odour from a flower all but dead, the material thing just a ‘cold relic’ of joy abandoned by its cause. The atmosphere of the scene suggests the last months in Pisa and at Casa Magni, Mary often unhappy, harrassed by her father, still depressed by the loss of her children, sometimes unwell, and pregnant again, while Shelley’s feelings for Jane Williams, living with Edward in an apartment immediately adjacent, were beginning to run deeper, and, one senses, less controllably with each passing week. The ‘Unfinished Drama’ is shot through with echoes. The word itself echoes repeatedly, as in the opening lyric, which invokes the assistance of Echo to call back the memory of lost love, only to reflect that

my heart has a music which Echo’s lips,

 Though tender and true, yet can answer not, —

Echo as memory; and memory cannot revive abandoned love; the heart’s music does not survive the removal of its stimulus. Geoffrey Matthews conjectured that those lines just quoted from the ‘Unfinished Drama’ were a cue for the lyric ‘When the lamp is shattered’. It is rough-drafted at the same place in the notebook, and was probably conceived as a song for the play, which was to alternate dramatic exchanges in blank verse with short songs in complex measures, in the manner of *The Tempest*. Another famous late lyric, ‘One word is too often profaned’, was also almost certainly written for the drama, as indeed were a number of other late fragments.

The preoccupation of the ‘Unfinished Drama’ with human experience which repeats across time and people takes us back to Shelley’s persisting interest in metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls. A transhistorical commonality in human experience presents a paradox: it is at once the basis of our sympathy with other minds, and hence our capacity for altruism; but it also confirms the perennial and irremedial essentials of the human condition. The theme of transmigration reappears in one of the most subtle and sophisticated of Shelley’s late lyrics, ‘With a Guitar. To Jane’. It is a poem thronged with literary echoes, the metre of *Comus* and *The Tempest*, the courtly idiom of a poem accompanying a gift, suggesting verses by Herrick, and Donne. The poem’s ambiguous voice, whereby Shelley speaks in the person of Ariel as to Miranda, but with a clear reference throughout to his relationship with Jane and Edward Williams, and Mary, enables a teasing directness moderated by the implied dramatic distance. It is important to grasp the poem’s fundamental conception in a playful pattern of relaxedly erudite allusion to Pythagorean and Platonic doctrines of metempsychosis, and of the mediation for humans of the Universal harmony through the agency of music: the guitar

 knew

 That seldom heard mysterious sound,

Which, driven on its diurnal round

As it floats through boundless day

Our world enkindles on its way — (ll. 75-79)

This touches on the Pythagorean doctrine of a harmony in the ‘tuning’ — the Greek word is αρμονια — of the Universe, a chord comprising the sounds emitted by the sun, moon, planets, and fixed stars which corresponds to a potential harmony inside the human being, obstructed by gross matter for all of us living mortals but accessible through music. Post-Platonic commentary developed the idea into the ‘music of the spheres’, and in the post-classical era the concept was Christianised, famously for example in Dryden’s ‘Song for St Cecilia’s Day’ as ‘The diapason closing full in man’. The body of the guitar Shelley gave to Jane was made from pine wood, and the poem consequently plays on the idea that in its previous existence as a pine tree it has heard this Universal harmony. The conceit of reincarnation is what knits together the elements of the lyric. Thus Shelley as the speaker of the poem is the reincarnation of the spirit Ariel, and Jane and Edward the reincarnations of Miranda and Ferdinand, aligning them with the spirit of the guitar as the reincarnation of the spirit that inhabited the tree from which it is made.

These identifications are made to elide for the reader as Shelley further implies a parallel between the guitar’s responsiveness to a skilful musician, and his own responsiveness under the stimulus of Jane, which serves as an image for the poet’s relation to his audience. The poem springs back into affective life in the mind of a receptive reader, just as an instrument is meaningless inert matter until touched to music in the hands of a skilled performer. The idea echoes Shelley’s translation of the Homeric ‘Hymn to Mercury’, with its lyre which has a transformative power in the hands of the right musician:

 for those endowed

 With art and wisdom who interrogate

It teaches, babbling in delightful mood,

 All things which make the spirit most elate,

Soothing the mind with sweet familiar play,

Chasing the heavy shadows of dismay. (ll. 647-52)

This informing conceit in ‘With a Guitar’ is an inflection of the affirmation that drives the closing stanzas of *Adonais*, the idea that poets are immortal in the sense that their work is continually reborn as it quickens to new life in fresh generations of readers:

The splendours of the firmament of time

May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;

Like stars to their appointed height they climb

And death is a low mist which cannot blot

The brightness it may veil. When lofty thought

Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,

And love and life contend in it, for what

Shall be its earthly doom, the dead live there

And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air. (ll. 388-96)

Shelley has been proved right in his vision of Keats’s immortality in this sense. But *Adonais*’s assertion of Keats’s greatness depends for its efficacy on Shelley’s poem itself outlasting time; and so it has proved. He has lived and lives in the minds of his readers. He lived through the Chartists and the Fabians. He lived in the writings of the international left and the speeches of Mahatma Gandhi. British Labour Politics has always turned to him, as indeed it did centrally in the general election of 2017, in the rallying slogan ‘for the many, not the few’, with its invocation of the climactic lines of *The Mask of Anarchy*. He lives through his influence on the work of poets and thinkers. He lives through the work of the scholars who have secured the transmission of his texts through time, and through the commentary of critics who interpret afresh for new generations in their new worlds. This conference can take its place in this continuing history. It is the conception and creation of young academics at the very start of their careers, carried through with hard work and careful planning, but also with accessible enthusiasm, and real panache. This event is a kind of reincarnation in itself, breathing new life into a series that began back in 1978, nearly forty years ago, with a conference at a country house in West Wales called Gregynog. There were further conferences there in 1980 and 1992, and that bicentenary year there was also a memorable event in New York.[[15]](#footnote-13) Now this new conference brings together established Shelleyans with young scholars in a celebration of Shelley’s, and Mary’s, extraordinary creative and intellectual legacy. I for one find its enthusiasm and energy not just heartening, but moving, in its testimony to a persisting intelligence and sanity and optimism, a flowering isle in today’s bizarre and unsettling world. It seems fitting to end by returning to my beginning, with the final stanza of ‘The Cloud’:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,

 And the nursling of the sky;

I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores;

 I change, but I cannot die —

For after the rain, when with never a stain,

 The pavilion of Heaven is bare,

And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams,

 Build up the blue Dome of Air,

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,

 And out of the caverns of rain,

Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,

 I arise, and unbuild it again. (ll. 73-84)

1. Timothy Morton, ‘The Notes to *Queen Mab* and Shelley’s Spinozism’, in *The Neglected Shelley*, edited by Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 77-94, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Shelley to Leigh Hunt, 21 June 1822; *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by Frederick L. Jones, 2 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), ii 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Unless otherwise stated, Shelley’s poetry is quoted from *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Jack Donovan, Kelvin Everest, Geoffrey Matthews, Michael Rossington *et al*, 4 volumes to date (London: Longman, 1989, 2000, 2011, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Aristophanes, *The Clouds* 340-1; Lucretius, *De Re. Nat.* vi 504. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Lucretius, *De Re. Nat.* iv 414-419; Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (1807; ed. Jack Simmons, 1951) 238-239; William Wordsworth, *Excursion* ix 467-473. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Quoted from the present writer’s text, forthcoming in *The Poems of Shelley* volume 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. See *The Poems of Shelley* iii 133 for Shelley’s note to line 534 of *Peter Bell the Third*, and Jack Donovan’s note on the passage. Drummond uses the phrase in *Academical Questions* (1805) II ch. ix; Peacock’s references are in *Melincourt*, chapter xxxi, and *Nightmare Abbey*, chapters iii and viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 88-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. *Letters* ii 184, 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 volumes (1858), i 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. See e.g. *Meno* 86b. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824), ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1966), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Quoted from the present writer’s text, forthcoming in *The Poems of Shelley* volume 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. The text is quoted here from the present writer’s editorial recension based on the sole surviving source, Shelley’s rough draft in a notebook now in the Bodleian Library, MS Shelley adds. e. 18. The draft occupies pp.157-156, 154, 148-130, and 125-124 of the notebook, all reverso. See also *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* [ ed. Mary Shelley] (London: John and Henry Hunt, 1824), pp. 97-102, 209, Richard Garnett, *Relics of Shelley* (London: Moxon, 1862) pp. 14-19, William Michael Rossetti (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 volumes (London: Moxon, 1870) ii 366-72, Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), pp. 528-34, and *The Faust Draft Notebook*, edited by Nora Crook and Timothy Webb, in *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, 23 volumes (New York and London: Garland, 1986-2002) xix 236-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Selected essays from the Gregynog conferences in 1978 and 1980 were published in Kelvin Everest (ed.), *Shelley Revalued* (Leicester University Press: Leicester, 1983); selected essays from the 1992 conference were published in Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle (eds.), *Evaluating Shelley* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)