Death as "Refuge and Ruin": Shelley's "A Vision of the Sea" and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

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> It has been the persuasion of an immense majority of human beings in all ages and nations that we continue to live after death—that apparent termination of all the functions of sensitive and intellectual existence. . . . Let us trace the reasonings . . . [and] discover what we ought to think on a question of such momentous interest. (Shelley, "On A Future State" [1818])[1]

I

THE "momentous" question above is one Shelley turned to repeatedly, attempting to reason his way to an account that would lift the "veil of life and death" ("Mont Blanc," line 54).[2] Though his inquiries were frequently dogged by his concomitant fascination with death's more titillating trappings—corpses, graveyards, and other nighttime terrors—questions surrounding the nature of mortality were central to his sometimes fluctuating skepticism, and were especially prominent in the poems and essays of his extended "annus mirabilis" of 1818–1820.[3] His stated conviction that death re-

1. "On A Future State" in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1926–30; 1929), VI, 205; hereafter cited in the text as *Complete Works*. All citations of Shelley's prose are from this edition and volume, except citations to "On Life" and "On Love," which are from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977); hereafter cited in the text.

2. All citations to Shelley's poetry, except "A Vision of the Sea," are from Reiman and Powers, ed., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.

3. Essays that feature some version of this debate include "The Necessity of Atheism" (1811); "Essay on Christianity" (1817); "On a Future State" (1818); "On Love" (1818); "On Life" (1819); "On the Punishment of Death" (1820); and the dramatic dialogue "A Refutation of Deism" (1813); as dated by P.M.S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 282–84.

sulted in total physical and psychic "termination" by which "[a]ll that we see or know perishes" (*Complete Works*, VI, 208) rested at best uncomfortably alongside his abiding faith in the enduring, transforming, and perhaps transcendent power of the human spirit.[4]

The poem in which Shelley most insistently investigates the material and metaphysical finality of death is the wildly emotional 169-line "A Vision of the Sea." Published in the 1820 *Prometheus Unbound* volume,[5] this gruesome chronicle of a doomed ship's voyage comes to us with little in the way of historical and critical context. Its composition date, assigned as 1820 by Mary Shelley, remains uncertain, along with its textual status: the work seems to hover in a purgatorial state somewhere between fragment and finished piece.[6] More problematic for the few critics who have directed any attention to it are the poem's narrative labyrinths and gothic excesses. Carl H. Ketcham, who has made the only substantial attempt to place the poem in a larger Shelleyan context, notes that its many lurid and grisly events are described with "positive glee,"[7] while the "madness" that grips the work has led most critics to express sentiments similar to those of Desmond King-Hele: "if poetry 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility,' the *Vision of the Sea*, where emotion seems to pour white-hot from mind to paper, can scarcely be called a poem."[8] With or without the application of this Words-

4. This tension between Shelley's empirical skepticism and his seeming "belief in a non-Christian Presence, one ultimately unified within itself as we and our words are not" (p. 7), has been addressed most recently and most comprehensively by Jerrold E. Hogle in *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5. Neil Fraistat's chapter, "Interrelations in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* Volume," in *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 141–87, is extremely helpful in suggesting thematic correspondences among and between the collection's ten works. His discussion of "A Vision" itself, however, is fairly brief and does not generally hold that the poem is intellectually substantial or even comprehensible. Moreover, Fraistat clearly sees the poem as presenting a strong challenge to his basic project, and even his modest assertion that "A Vision" is a coherent component of the *Prometheus Unbound* volume is offered only with qualifications.

6. See Elsie F. Mayer, "Notes on the Composition of 'A Vision of the Sea,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 28 (1979), 17–20.

7. Carl H. Ketcham, "Shelley's 'A Vision of the Sea,'" *Studies in Romanticism*, 17 (1978), 55.

8. Edmund Blunden, *Shelley: A Life Story* (London: Collins, 1946), p. 227; and Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work*, 2nd ed. (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), p. 236.

worthian premise, the poem has been labeled as a largely self-indulgent, regrettable example of Shelley's often undisciplined gothic sensibility.

Even acknowledging the poem's many problems, it is still remarkable that it has been deemed so inscrutable given its obvious debt to one of the most familiar works in Romantic literature, Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." We know that the "Mariner" was one of Shelley's favorite poems. Captivated by its supernatural elements, he frequently recited it, according to Mary Shelley, with "wild energy" (and it is also mentioned in Claire Clairmont's journal).[9] Richard Holmes argues that a particular reading of the "Mariner" and Wordsworth's "The Mad Mother" on an evening in October 1814 figured prominently in one of the cycles of psychological "witch-raising" that Shelley periodically engaged in while in the company of credulous young women.[10] Whatever we make of Holmes's analysis regarding this occasion, we can easily imagine Shelley urgently voicing Coleridge's rhythmic cadences, and exerting over his audiences a hypnotic effect not unlike that induced by the Mariner's own glittering eye. That the "Mariner" was present in the Shelley household is also evident from Mary's explicit use of it in *Frankenstein*, where it appears both as a direct incantation in the novel's opening stages and then recurs in the icy becalming of the latter part of the novel.[11]

For "A Vision of the Sea" Percy Shelley adopted from Coleridge's poem not only the governing gothic aesthetic and the ocean setting but particular images and plot details: a pestilent sea, the grisly death of the crew, a fearful and desperate solitude. In the early stages of Shelley's poem direct echoes and adaptations of Coleridge's language are especially pervasive.[12] As attracted to Coleridge's mesmerizing

9. Quoted in Newman Ivey White, *Portrait of Shelley* (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 237. See also *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 34, 43, 47.

10. Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Quartet Books, 1976; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 257–59.

11. Both Victor Frankenstein's scientific investigations of life in *Frankenstein* and Percy Shelley's inquiry into death in "A Vision" seek to resolve similar questions: is life merely equivalent to the proper assembly of its material parts? Can death be overcome or transcended by a proper application of human will and ingenuity?

12. Several examples are: Shelley's stormy ocean waves are "a rout / Of death-flames" (lines 18–19);

language and supernatural setting as Shelley was, however, his greater interest was in the excruciating existential crisis faced by the Mariner in his solitary confrontation with death and approaching divine judgment. In the Mariner's pointed and poignant cry of fearful isolation, "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea" (lines 232–33), Shelley found an image that resonated deeply with his own bivalent (and indeed conflicted) feelings about the significance of death. This image, on the one hand, spoke to Shelley's comprehensive belief in humanity's spiritual isolation: as he had frequently and triumphantly asserted, humans lived in a universe devoid of any supernatural superstructure—Christian or otherwise—that could grant them spiritual salvation.[13] On the other hand, the Mariner's plaintive cry simultaneously addressed a sense of isolation that Shelley anticipated with no small amount of dread: the loss of human community that would accompany death. Again and again between 1818 and 1820, and notably in "A Vision of the Sea," we find him trying to reconcile his beliefs, seeking the insight "known / But to the uncommunicating dead" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III.iii. 111–12).

Coleridge, describing the silent sea, writes, "in reel and rout / The death-fires danced at night" (lines 127–28). Coleridge's snowy clifts "send a dismal sheen" (line 56); the peaks of Shelley's waves "inconsistently shine" (line 24). Shelley's ship, its mast shattered from "the intense thunder-balls which are raining from heaven" (line 29), "splits like the ice when the thaw-breezes blow" (line 36). Coleridge's "ice did split like a thunder-fit" (line 69). In describing the pestilent sea, Coleridge writes, "All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun, at noon, / Right up above the mast did stand" (lines 111–13). Shelley's description reads, "Where the death-darting sun cast no shadow at noon" (line 47). The Mariner, "stuck" without "breath [or] motion" (line 116), wails that "The very deep did rot: O Christ!" (line 123), while on Shelley's "windless expanse of the watery plain" (line 46), "a lead-colored fog gathered up from the deep / Whose breath was quick pestilence" (lines 49–50). Later in the poem, Shelley, describing the battle between the tiger and the sea-snake, writes "the screams / And hissings, crawl fast o'er the smooth ocean-streams, / Each sound like a centipede" (lines 146–48), imagery reminiscent of Coleridge's couplet "Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea" (lines 125–26). References to "A Vision of the Sea" from *Complete Works*, vol. 2. Quotations of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Oxford Authors*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

13. Jerrold E. Hogle writes that Shelley "disavows God in most of His ancient and Christian forms. From his earliest writing days until his death, sometimes for personal and sometimes for professional reasons, Shelley rails against the notion of a self-contained Immanence enthroned at the top of a cosmic hierarchy as the standard by which all things are made and judged" (*Shelley's Process*, p. 6). Especially interesting to Hogle, however, is Shelley's accompanying tendency to find intellectual, social, and natural "Spirit[s]" that have "godlike," even "persistently biblical" powers (*Shelley's Process*, p. 7). Both the nature of Shelley's atheism and his use of Christianity are cogently discussed in Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 157–90, 214–17.

For all its narrative chaos, then, "A Vision" has at its heart a question that Shelley poses with admirable directness and clarity: "Alas! what is life, what is death, what are we, / That when the ship sinks we no longer may be?" (lines 82–83). In attempting to answer this question Shelley establishes decisive contrasts between his own metaphysical seascape and that of the "Mariner," but the ultimate goal of "A Vision" is not simply a systematic rejection of what some readers have taken to be the facile evangelical Christianity of Coleridge's work. Indeed it would be a mistake to assume that Shelley took at face value the superficial piety of a poem that Coleridge later called a work of "pure imagination."[14] Rather, Shelley restages the crises and dilemmas that the "Mariner" brings so acutely into focus so that he may then articulate his own sense of human spiritual isolation and of death's significance. We shall see, however, that while Shelley operates with relative ease when constructing an alternative metaphysical framework to Coleridge's supernatural universe, he will find it difficult, within the constraints of that framework, to offer a cogent account of death and its implications for human spirituality. Instead, Shelley struggles to walk an almost impossibly fine line, familiar in his work of 1818–1820: to offer a rational, often mechanistic view of death and organic processes, and yet still promote the hope that "Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance" (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV.562) may provide humanity with an extra-physical final peace.

II

Shelley proceeds with great conviction when debunking what is at

14. Critics have long been fascinated with the difficulty of assigning the internal moral theology of Coleridge's poem to Coleridge himself. As Susan Eilenberg has recently put it, in *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 31, "The *Rime* evades the question any reader asks upon opening to this first poem in the originally anonymous *Lyrical Ballads*: 'Whose voice is this?'" The question is further complicated by the fact that Coleridge did not add the moralizing gloss until years after the poem's original composition. For a discussion of the poem's textual history, the gloss, the Higher (Biblical) Criticism, and Coleridge's evolving theology, see Jerome J. McGann, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," *Critical Inquiry*, 8.1 (Autumn 1981), 36–67. The last thirty years have seen a wide range of attempts to assess the poem's moralizing voice, including Gayle Smith, "A Reappriaisal of the Moral Stanzas in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Studies in Romanticism*, 3.1 (Autumn 1963), 42–52; Francis Ferguson, "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" *Georgia Review*, 31.3 (Fall 1977), 617–35; Arnold E. Davidson, "The Concluding Moral in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Philological Quarerly*, 60.1 Winter (1981), 87–94.

least the internally operative cosmology of "The Ancient Mariner," a cosmology in which humanity, nature, and divine justice function as component parts of a coherent system. In his essays Shelley describes such a system as one of "rewards and punishments" (*Complete Works*, VI, 206), wherein human thought and action are adjudicated by a "peculiar Providence" who intervenes "to punish the vicious and reward the virtuous" (*Complete Works*, VI, 232). His alternative in "A Vision" begins with a demystified natural world that it is "subjected to the laws of inanimate matter" (*Complete Works*, VI, 207). He revisits Coleridge's opening storm "blast" ("Ancient Mariner," line 41; "Vision," line 27), depicting, in the place of Coleridge's fantastic and vengeful seascape, a mechanistic cacophony of elemental powers run amok, including a ship pummeled by "black trunks [of] waterspouts" (line 5), "intense thunder-balls . . . raining from heaven" (line 29), and "death-flames, like whirlpools of fire-flowing iron" (line 19) that fill the horizon. This is a celebration of the natural world's cataclysmically raw power, but more important it notifies us of that world's indifference to human affairs. While the Mariner must negotiate a cosmological system so fully integrated that a "bird . . . made the breeze to blow" (lines 95–96), Shelley's characters are mute and feeble witnesses to a chaotic natural world that, in its mammoth disregard for human endeavors, is an upside-down version of "Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (line 97) Mont Blanc.

Shelley's method here of using highly emotional language and excessively sensational images of "splendour and terror" (line 20) may seem a paradoxical means of developing a starkly analytical reading of the universe's material workings. Yet this approach is typical of his strategy in philosophic argument, particularly in the essays: he consistently frames his philosophic positions by reference to the worst-case scenarios of human experience. By demonstrating his willingness to confront even the most outlandish versions of "the Worst," he establishes his ethos as a steely-eyed, truth-seeking "natural philosopher," engaging in a "test of experience and fact" (*Complete Works*, VI, 207, 205).[15] Although the final persuasive power of this appeal is

15. Carl H. Ketcham's understanding of Shelley's motive for "the theatrical violence with which the poem begins" is virtually identical to my own (although we read the latter portion of the poem quite differently): "[Shelley] wants to show Nature honestly and vividly at her most destructive before sug-

sometimes diluted by his obvious relish for those experiences and facts containing the greatest shock value, this blend of "passion's wandering wing" and "reason's firmer tread" (*Queen Mab*, VI.58–59) provides his essential means of argument from the very first of his published polemics, "The Necessity of Atheism (1811). In "A Vision of the Sea," the hyperbolic tempest passage, in which the surf is a "chaos of stars" (line 18) amidst "Dim mirrors of ruin" (line 17), is ultimately offered to us in service of Shelley's sober belief that "[t]he laws of motion and the properties of matter suffice to account for every phenomenon, or combination of phenomena, exhibited in the Universe" (*Complete Works*, VI, 50).[16]

The same sort of rhetorical appeal underlies the poem's rashest and most sensational passage, the litany recounting the death of the crew. Shelley writes that a pestilence "Crept, like blight through the ears of a thick field of corn, / O'er the populous vessel" (lines 51–52). As the crew is relentlessly taken, "like dead men the dead limbs of their comrades" (line 54) are cast into the deep. There, "the sharks and the dogfish their grave-clothes unbound, / And were glutted like Jews with this manna rain'd down / From God on their wilderness" (lines 56–58).[17] Six others "the thunder has smitten, / And they lie black as mummies on which Time has written / His scorn of the embalmer" (lines 61–63). A seventh lies with "An oak-splinter pierced through his breast and his back" (line 64).[18]

Shelley betrays little cognizance of the basic instability generated

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gesting more hopeful possibilities. This is a protective device familiar in Shelley's work: to avert a charge of facile optimism, he often exacts not only a full but a lingeringly detailed look at the Worst. . . . At the outset of 'A Vision' he plunges into a catalogue of natural horrors so complete that it approaches the comic" ("Shelley's 'A Vision of the Sea,'" 53).

16. Shelley's description of nature's "might" (line 99) and "splendour and terror" (line 20) echoes the zeal of the youthful Wordsworth who saw nature's sublimity as "all in all" ("Tintern Abbey," line 75). But where Wordsworth's increasing reliance on the mediating influence of "the mind of man" (line 99) made such a purely sensual response finally impossible, Shelley insists that sensual admiration and intellectual understanding can be independently and simultaneously maintained. (William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965].)

17. Shelley revises Exodus 16:13–36 here.

18. Neil Fraistat rightly notes that, like "A Vision," "The Sensitive Plant" "abound[s] with images of ruin and corruption" (*The Poem and the Book*, p. 173), but he tends not to view these images as attempts vividly to define a sometimes harshly material external world. Instead, Fraistat sees the poems of the *Prometheus Unbound* volume as continually focusing on the notion that "the hostile, unhumanized natural world . . . results from the mind's own disintegration."

by the use of such unrestrained language to advance a dispassionate essay on the physics of death. Yet despite this instability—and despite what may seem an almost juvenile delight in such descriptions—the detail of this language actually reveals his desire, in Wordsworth's words, to "look steadily" at his object.[19] "On A Future State" begins with a similarly bald confrontation of the physical facts of death. "How can a corpse see or feel?" Shelley asks; "its eyes are eaten out, and its heart is black and without motion. What intercourse can two heaps of putrid clay and crumbling bones hold together?" (*Complete Works*, VI, 207). Shelley identifies the aversion of the "common observer" to death's physical details as the first step in the pernicious mystification and mythologizing of death. He attempts to block such a process by flaunting death's materiality, thus forcing us towards a more "philosophic" consideration of its implications.

Shelley's interest early in the poem in the mechanical underpinnings of the natural world is buttressed by his chronicle of "twin tigers" living aboard the ship (line 40).[20] Though imbued with supreme animating energy and vitality, their life force is machine-like: they are driven by "some hideous engine" (line 145); their claws dig "like a crank" (line 43). As the ship sinks and the tigers must engage the storm-tossed sea directly, Shelley is again the hard headed natural philosopher, compelling the reader to acknowledge the brutal finality of their struggle for survival. The tigers' eyes are a "radiance of fear" (line 73); they "Stand rigid with horror" while "a loud, long, hoarse cry / Burst[s] at once from their vitals tremendously" (lines 94–95). By displacing the tigers from their traditional role as predators and casting them instead as potential prey in an alien environment, Shelley in effect defamiliarizes the natural order, refining our sense of its naked ruthlessness.

Eventually one tiger is "mingled in ghastly affray / With a sea-

19. *William Wordsworth: Selected Prose*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 285.

20. Perhaps the tigers are intended as a gloss on Coleridge's Albatross. Unlike the "pious bird of good omen" who intuitively seeks the communion of the mariners, the tigers are literally forced into their relationship with humanity: "chain[ed] in the hold" (line 41). The innate fellowship that joins all living things in Coleridge's poem is pronounced in its absence from the opening passages of Shelley's seascape.

snake" (lines 137–38), and Shelley charts its fate with language that, as in the passages that precede it, shrouds anatomical exactness in lurid sensationalism:

> Of solid bones crushed by the infinite stress
> Of the snake's adamantine voluminousness;
> And the hum of the hot blood that spouts and rains
> Where the gripe of the tiger has wounded the veins.
> (lines 140–43)

A singular vision of the natural world motivates this seemingly gratuitous description, and the nature of that vision becomes clear when we recall the "water-snakes" of Coleridge's poem that are giving Shelley his organizing image here. Within the design of "The Ancient Mariner," the water-snakes provide the occasion for the Mariner's unconscious blessing and thus demarcate the turning point in his spiritual odyssey: the blessing signals his inherent capacity to appreciate the goodness of God's creation, and once it is uttered, the Albatross is released, the shooting forgiven, and harmony reinstated. Shelley presents a radically demystified revision, almost sardonic in tone: Coleridge's water-snakes are now but one more link in the food chain.

This alternative vision is unveiled still further as the scope of his observation expands. Even as tiger and snake vie for some temporary triumph and respite, "a blue shark is hanging within the blue ocean" (line 149), itself waiting to consume the hapless "victor." This relentless account describes, to use a post-Shelleyan formulation, pure Darwinian competition, a natural world stripped of moral caveats or metaphysical second chances. Shelley clearly takes a grim satisfaction in this portrayal, and we are reminded of his near-taunting voice in "On A Future State": "The common observer . . . contends in vain against the persuasion of the grave, that the dead indeed cease to be. The corpse at his feet is prophetic of his own destiny" (*Complete Works*, VI, 206).

Collectively, these representations of the natural order work to secure the frame for Shelley's narrative. He has taken Coleridge's

supernaturally surreal playing field and leveled it according to his own design, expunging invisible denizens, spiritual valences, and the "panic fears and hateful superstitions which have enslaved mankind for ages" (*Complete Works*, VI, 236). Within this new field, Shelley places characters whose ontological bearings and personal ethics offer a similar contrast to the Mariner's psychic orientation. Coleridge's figure is defined by his inexplicable criminality, by the baffling willfulness of the shooting. It is his guilty act, seemingly unmotivated but undeniably self-determined, that marks him as human. Shelley removes this ontological culpability and with it the suggestion of original sin that pervades the Mariner's tale. Indeed, Shelley banishes any notion of either cosmic or local culpability from his poem. His beautiful woman is almost preposterously innocent, clutching the wreck of the ship, attempting somehow to preserve herself and her equally innocent "bright child" from the continual onslaught of natural calamities (line 69). He refuses to provide us any context whatsoever regarding her past activities or present relation to the ship; she is simply "more fair / Than heaven" (lines 66–67), and exists in the poem in a sort of dazed stasis—passive, uncertain, and literally anonymous.

We might expect that Shelley, in recounting her struggle, would attempt to mitigate the suffering that is such a prominent feature of Coleridge's narrative, since he has freed her of the burden of existential guilt, and has painstakingly severed the connections between humanity, the natural landscape, and any system of "rewards and punishments." Instead, Shelley leaves the experience of suffering intact: although he has demystified the problem of pain, the pain itself remains. Indeed, it is starker here than in Coleridge because it is so commonplace, so factual, so unmediated. The context-free anonymity of his pseudo-heroine appropriately reflects the utter randomness of her victimization, and we come to recognize that, if the Mariner if Coleridge's *Every*person, she is more aptly described as Shelley's *Any*person. Not the archetypal actor of the "Mariner," not the agent of an awful symbolic deed, she is instead an unremarkable bystander caught in terrible circumstances.

It is of course tempting to try to find in this anonymous figure reminders of more distinctly drawn Shelleyan women, including the imprisoned Emilia Viviani character of "Epipsychidion" and the trag-

ically victimized mother of "The Mask of Anarchy."[21] Yet in these cases, as in several others we might hypothesize, the common characteristics she shares with her more familiar counterparts are those that Shelley most readily—even routinely—celebrated: innocence, beauty, purity of spirit, love of life. As such, the qualities that link her to more fully elaborated figures should not move us to infer a more complex sense of her character. Instead she is far more like the women described in the most broadly generic of terms in Act III of *Prometheus Unbound*, who—after the purification of the earth—become universally "frank, beautiful, and kind" (III.iv.153). Her perfunctory portrayal establishes her as fundamentally human, as embodying the values most common in Shelley's articulations of the human condition. She is in effect an allegorical figure; she has no name but is allegoricized as the embodiment of the Shelleyan ideals, which we must infer from the few details of her character that we are given.

The terms of Shelley's definition of an essential (or essentially idealized) humanity emerge in some greater detail in her single monologue, significantly the poem's only direct speech by a character and, unsurprisingly, a meditation on death. Even this meditation fails to establish her as an idiosyncratic or fully realized character; instead she is a blatant mouthpiece for a philosophical position Shelley has already pointedly articulated in his essays. She cries to her child: "What! to see thee no more, and to feel thee no more? / To be after life what we have been before?" (lines 84–85). We can only read this as a begged question, given that Shelley had written in 1818: "[s]o far as thought and life is concerned, the same will take place with regard to us, individually considered, after death, as had place before our birth" (*Complete Works*, VI, 209). Even the particular images she cites in anticipating her loss are prophetic of an end that Shelley has, outside of the poem, predicted with a steady resolve. While she asks, "Not to touch those sweet hands? Not to look on those eyes, / Those

21. The Emilia Viviani character, celebrated by Shelley for her beauty and suffering in the face of danger, is described in language strikingly appropriate to Shelley's figure here: "Thou living Form / Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm! / Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror! / Thou Harmony of Nature's Art!" ("Epipsychidion," lines 27–30). For an extended discussion of maternity in Shelley, see Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, *Shelley's Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

lips, and that hair, all that smiling disguise" (lines 86–87), he has already said of the dead:

> Those who have preceded him, and whose voice was delightful to his ear; whose touch met his like sweet and subtle fire; whose aspect spread a visionary light upon his path—these he cannot meet again. (*Complete Works*, VI, 206)

What emerges most obviously from the comparison of these passages is their focus on the loss of tactile sensuality: "hands . . . eyes . . . lips . . . hair," the "sweet and subtle fire:" of the human touch. This loss is the same as that feared in *Prometheus Unbound* by even the immortal Asia, in her tremulous question to her mother Earth: "Cease they to love and move and breathe and speak / Who die?" (III.iii. 109–110). In his sudden highlighting of corporeal pleasure in "A Vision of the Sea," Shelley revisits, and inverts, the poem's earlier crass flaunting of death's gruesome physical horrors. The agony attending violent death is transformed into "the pain of bliss / To move, to breathe" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III.iv.125–26), our still-fresh memory of that earlier pain resensitizing us to the palpable beauty and physical delight of the "wide world" ("Vision," line 135).

It is in Shelley's concern with the impending loss of sensual bliss and human contact that we can begin to locate the one definition of death he repeatedly articulates in "A Vision of the Sea." Despite some of the poem's peculiar equivocations (which I will turn to shortly) Shelley consistently focuses on death as the site of human separation. In the innocent young woman's final plea to her infant, the threat of their impending separation overwhelms her capacity to conceive of death:

> But sleep deeply and sweetly, and so be beguiled
> Of the pang that awaits us, whatever that be,
> So dreadful since thou must divide it with me! (lines 77–79)

Death, "whatever that be," signifies for her only in its power to isolate her from a unique, passionate relationship, and it has the potential to threaten them only because, once isolated, they must "divide," rather than share, its "pang." We can now see that the poem's considerable attention to death-as-physical-termination is offered as a

necessary prelude to Shelley's assertion that death's final importance lies in its dissolution of human communities. His lengthy examination of "the dead limbs" (line 54) and "crumbling bones" (*Complete Works*, VI, 207) of the mariners is conducted so that there can be no doubt, at its conclusion, that "the dead indeed cease to be" (*Complete Works*, VI, 206). Once that fact is established, Shelley suggests, we will cease investing our psychic energies in the self-generated myth of an eternal "future state" (*Complete Works*, VI, 209), and properly reinvest these energies in generating the "sweetest sounds" of the fulfilling human relationships available on earth ("Epipsychidion," line 145).

In focussing on the pathos of separation, Shelley has taken another of the central concerns of the "Mariner"—the horror of human isolation—and revised it in light of his ongoing contempt for the system of "rewards and punishments." The Mariner's memorable cry of alienation is a cry of "Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate; / And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood" (*Prometheus Unbound*, II.iv.24–25):

> Alone, alone, all, all alone,
> Alone on a wide wide sea!
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony.
>
> The many men, so beautiful!
> And they all dead did lie:
> And a thousand thousand slimy things
> Lived on; and so did I. (lines 232–39)[22]

The Mariner truly does lament his separation from "the many men, so beautiful," and, indeed, from creation writ large, but these lamentations exist at least partly in the context of what Shelley calls "the absurd and execrable doctrine of vengeance": the Mariner's sincere self-loathing is influenced and permeated by his fear of a divine power "interfering to punish the vicious and reward the virtuous" (*Complete*

22. It doubtless would have moved Shelley to know that, twenty-five years after Mary recorded his wild recitation of "The Ancient Mariner," she would return to her journal (April 16, 1841) to cite this passage of Coleridge to express her own profound loneliness. (*The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], II, 573).

Works, VI, 232). For Shelley the notion of divine judgment is, as he says in the "Essay On Christianity," a "doctrine of . . . fanatics" (*Complete Works*, VI, 232), one that cannot help but promote the self-absorption that is manifest in several of the Mariner's defining statements and actions. In "A Vision" Shelley re-legitimates the integrity of the Mariner's fears of alienation by detaching his own characters from the looming threat of "the judgement-throne" ("Ode to Liberty," line 232). The specter of separation feared by his anonymous mother is motivated not by an external philosophy but by an intuitive sympathy with "man's deep spirit" ("Ode to Liberty," line 257).

III

Having constructed, through his inspired transformation of the "Mariner," a rational, "solid universe of external things" ("On Life," p. 476), Shelley attempts, in the poem's final section, to address the more nuanced part of his inquiry: how, within the constraints of a mechanistic universe, to forge for mortal humanity a vision of some lasting hope that is a compelling alternative to the "shocking absurdities" that accompany a theistic worldview ("On Life," p. 476)? As in many of the other instances from his corpus where he attempts to negotiate the vexed relationship between "Hope" and "its own wreck" (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV.573–74),[23] Shelley turns to natural processes for encouraging analogies. The "image of some bright Eternity" ("Epipsychidion," line 115) that he summons, a stunningly rhapsodic hymn to the powers of natural regeneration, fulfills his need for a "true fair world of things—a Sea reflecting Love" (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV.384), but in so doing dramatically damages the poem's philosophic coherence.

The regenerative spirit emerges suddenly out of what begins as another ruinous elemental collision between "[b]anded armies of light

23. In "Mont Blanc" the crisis is largely psychic: under what terms can the mind maintain hope when, in endlessly "rapid waves" (line 2), it is "Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom" (line 3)? In "The Sensitive Plant" the inquiry is more broadly existential: what can serve to motivate humanity to action when the human condition is inevitably one "Of error, ignorance and strife" (conclusion, line 10)? In other poems, this crisis is not a crisis at all, but merely a source of fascination: "no second motion brings / One mood or modulation like the last" Shelley marvels in "Mutability," for "be it joy or sorrow . . . Nought may endure but Mutability" (lines 7–8, 13, 16).

and air" (line 119). The natural armies "encounter, but [on this occasion] interpenetrate" (line 120), and this interpenetration is not invasive or destructive, but a gloriously rejuvenating mingling of the elements. The implicitly sexual connotations of this act become increasingly overt as the pasage develops:

> The wind has burst out through the chasm, from the air
> Of clear morning, the beams of the sunrise flow in,
> Unimpeded keen, golden, and crystalline
> . . . . . .
> And that breach in the tempest is widening away,
> And the caverns of cloud are torn up by the day,
> And the fierce winds are sinking with weary wings,
> Lulled by the motion and murmurings,
> And the long glassy heave of the rocking sea. (lines 116–25)

The light, air, and sea described here bear no resemblance whatsoever to the brute material forces of earlier in the poem, but are instead sensual and possibly even sentient agents, awash in the peace that evolves out of their communal love-making: the "heaped waves" (line 128) of the ocean, under the influence of "deep calm of blue heaven dilating above" (line 129) become quiet and soothing, "like passions made still by the presence of Love" (line 130). The potentially destructive energies of the storm are diffused, transformed, and assimilated back into the natural community: "The wrecks of the tempest, like vapours of gold, / Are consuming in sunrise" (lines 127–28).

Of the many nature metaphors Shelley found useful for human consolation, perhaps the most vital were those by which he envisioned life emerging resplendently, as it does here, from the pit of deepest despair. "The Cloud," for example, changes but "cannot die" (line 76); it "silently laugh[s] at [its] own cenotaph" (line 81), for out of the very material of its ruin, it "arise[s], and unbuild[s] it again" (lines 82–84). Shelley sees the natural world so successfully "creat[ing] / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV.573–74) that he can reliably imagine, even before death, the resurrection to follow: "O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" ("Ode to the West Wind," lines 69–70). Most

significantly, Shelley at times understands these "tameless, and swift, and proud" (line 56) natural energies as having more than a narrowly metaphoric relationship to human experience. The elements, he argues, contain an inexactly defined but nonetheless real power of regeneration that is accessible to humanity. Thus he seeks in the "Ode to the West Wind" more than an intellectualized source of consolation: he desires a bodily infusion and transformation. His appeal is not to the wind *per se* but to the external Spirit that first inhabits and then drives the wind, and his hope is that the spirit will similarly inhabit him: "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (lines 61–62).

"A Vision of the Sea" has begun to theorize the possible connection of humanity and nature through mutual engagement with just such a spirit. Yet Carl H. Ketcham maintains that the poem's resolution of elemental contentiousness is directed at something far different, affirming, rather than contradicting, the poem's earlier emphasis on the existential unrelatedness of nature and humanity. This argument is potentially important, especially if Ketcham is right in his assertion that, excepting "Mont Blanc," "A Vision of the Sea" is Shelley's "most explicit treatment of man vs. Nature";[24] but his argument is finally difficult to credit or even evaluate since he fails to cite lines 116–34, the problematic passages detailing the sexualized conjoining of the elements. Of course one is inclined to see the bloody and battling tigers and sharks as somehow more reflective of Shelley's understanding of external nature than his idealized visions of golden sunlight and willful clouds, but the impulse to dismiss visions of sentient, idealized nature in favor of some mechanistic "actual" world simply cannot be honored in interpreting this poem or in interpreting Shelley generally.

Nor is it only in the utopian millenialism of works like *Prometheus Unbound* that we find Shelley insisting on a fundamental resonance between humanity and the natural world. In his essay "On Love"

24. Carl H. Ketcham, "Shelley's 'A Vision of the Sea,'" 54. Ketcham understands the end of the violence in the poem as working in concert with its earlier images of ruin to finalize the assertion that nature "is not hostile but indifferent." "The destructiveness of the tempest has been ended by an apparently random play of natural power," he says, with what he sees as the arbitrary suspension of violence affirming that states of both destruction and calm reveal nature's independence from humanity.

(1818), a work that seems designed to counter the existential chaos posited early in "A Vision of the Sea," he identifies love as the element that inevitably links humanity with the broader physical universe. These bonds survive even when people exist in Mariner-like isolation or when human communities fail: "in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings and yet they sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass and the waters and the sky" ("On Love," p. 474). However Shelley may imagine death elsewhere, he argues within "On Love" that the absence of this constitutional sympathy brings effective death to the human spirit: "So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was" (p. 474).

The images from "On Love" suggest that Shelley is working towards a notion of natural salvation that is seemingly at odds both with the "popular philosophy" ("On Life," p. 476) of conventional Christianity and with the mechanism of "A Vision of the Sea." The essay's attempt to clarify that notion is, however, complicated by Shelley's implicit assertion that love is not possessed of any verifiable independent reality, but is instead simply a psychological reality generated by the perceptions of individual human minds:

> [Love] is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves *when we find within our own thoughts* the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community *with what we experience within ourselves*. ("On Love," p. 473; emphasis mine)

This passage hints that all of the broad terms Shelley is investigating (both here and in "A Vision")—nature, death, humanity itself—exist only as products of the infinite regress that is the human mind. At issue here is not merely Fraistat's point (made in reference to the *Prometheus Unbound* volume) that for Shelley "the world is actively structured by the mind."[25] At issue instead is the notion, argued even more directly in "On Life" than in "On Love," that the human mind is so self-enveloped that it simply has no access to external reality;

25. Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book*, p. 144.

perhaps, indeed, the very concept of "external reality" is the product of a terminally self-enclosed psyche. "Nothing exists but as it is perceived" he writes, "The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects" ("On Life," p. 477).[26]

In these essays Shelley has outlined an epistemological crisis so profound that, if applied to the clearly stated question at the heart of "A Vision," threatens to stop his inquiry into mortality dead in its tracks. And even if we do not consider these observations to be prohibitively debilitating in Shelley's search for knowledge, they surely suggest that he has less than complete confidence in his ability to penetrate the "mysteries of the Universe" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III.iv.105). In *Prometheus Unbound* the great mysteries of "birth and death" ("On Life," p. 476) finally become comprehensible, even to the immortals, only as a product of the universal regeneration that follows Prometheus's vindication. The Spirit of the Hour recounts that:

> There was a change . . . the impalpable thin air
> And the all-circling sunlight were transformed
> As if the sense of love dissolved in them
> Had folded itself round the sphered world.
> My vision then grew clear and I could see
> Into the mysteries of the Universe. (III.iv.100–105)

In this passage the arrival of a consuming "presence of Love," ("A Vision of the Sea," line 130) leads to verifiable knowledge of the world's deep truths, but in "A Vision" itself, whatever the immediate benefits of this suddenly appearing love for the safety of the sea-swept human characters, there are frustratingly limited epistemological benefits that derive from natural harmony. As the poem continues the mortals remain thoroughly unenlightened about the nature of their own mortality.

What the poem gives us instead is a renewed emphasis on the communitarian vision of "On Love." That essay's definition of love as an organic, even familial "bond and . . . sanction which connects not

26. For a discussion of the complex issues surrounding Shelley's notion of self-consciousness, see Thomas Pfau, "Tropes of Desire: Figuring the 'insufficient void' of Self-Consciousness in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 40 (1991), 99–126.

only man with man, but with every thing which exists" ("On Love," p. 473), is, in fact, realized in the last complete line of "A Vision of the Sea": "Like a sister and brother / The child and the ocean still smile on each other" (lines 167–68). Here at the poem's putative conclusion it seems to have virtually inverted its earlier perspective, now positing a conscious and organic will to harmony where earlier "to the eye of [the] shipwrecked mariner, / Lone sitting on the bare and shuddering rock, / All seem[ed] unlinked contingency and chance" (*Queen Mab*, VI.168–70). Yet for all this momentary optimism, it is by now apparent, given the range of core psycho-philosophical dilemmas contained in Shelley's relevant essays, that the few narrative lines still dangling are helpless to frame a coherent or conclusive response to the question "what is death?" (line 82). Just as "A Vision of the Sea" has refused to fully embrace the hyper-rationalism it opens with, it now refuses to provide a secure conclusion that will consolidate and authorize its tentative notion of natural salvation. In examining these unresolved narrative threads we see that the difficulty of Ketcham's argument lies not so much in its specific readings as in its impulse to impose on the poem a coherence it almost perversely refused to sustain.

Though the poem leads us to the very brink of narrative closure, it is finally "incapable" of resolving the fates of its characters or of its larger inquiry.[27] The mother will apparently be rescued by "twelve rowers with the impulse of thought" (line 153) who seem "much too plainly" cast as the embodiment of rationality.[28] Shelley is apparently restaging Coleridge's rescue scene, replacing the "holy Hermit" (line 562) and devil-fearing pilot boy with a sort of rational cavalry, and we thus expect the mother to show a faith in these twelve thinking rowers similar to the Mariner's belief in the "good" (line 509) Hermit who will "shrieve [his] soul" and "wash away / The Albatross's blood" (lines 512–13).

Yet no testimonial to rational thought follows. Shelley's figure clings to what she knows best, trusting neither the rowers nor the harmony of creation: "With her left hand she grasps [the ship] impetuously, / With her right hand she sustains her fair infant" (lines

27. Elsie F. Mayer, "Notes on the Composition of 'A Vision of the Sea,'" 19.
28. Carl H. Ketcham, "Shelley's 'A Vision of the Sea,'" 55.

160–61). The hope of a glorious rescue seems to crumble as the unity in creation itself fails: suddenly the air "burns with the fervor of dread" (line 163), and we see a return to the tableau of chaos and emotion that marked the earlier part of the poem: "Death, Fear, / Love, Beauty, are mixed in the atmosphere" (lines 161–62). In this state of tenuous balance Shelley's figure remains, for the rescue, remarkably, never occurs. Shelley opens line 169 with the forward-looking word "Whilst," and abruptly the poem is over.

Shelley has flatly turned down his self-generated opportunity to rebut or amend the Mariner's spiritual rescue, and he refuses an equally pregnant opportunity with the poem's other lingering narrative strand, that concerning the second tiger. The focus here is again on making meaning of imminent death: we watch as the tiger, pursued and finally shot by three marksmen, is "winning his way from the fate of his brother / To his own with the speed of despair" (lines 151–52). This image meshes neatly with the schema of Darwinian-style competition Shelley has advanced earlier, but the scene's denouement is radically equivocal, engaging in the mystification of death Shelley had earlier seemed dedicated to banishing. The "Hot bullets [that] burn / In the breast of the tiger" (lines 155–56) bear him to a death that Shelley defines, with maddening ambiguity, as "refuge and ruin" (line 157).

Shelley's highly paradoxical "refuge and ruin," effectively inscribes the confusion that by now dominates the poem's investigation of mortality. He confesses his discomfort with defining death in purely material terms: for all his faith in the notion of reason, he cannot envision a world without an almost extra-physical "presence of Love" (line 130). Yet he has also retreated from the idealism of his most optimistic figuration, and what he seeks is not so much a compromised middle ground as a deferral of final judgement. His essay "On the Punishment of Death," written in the fall of 1820, insists that an intellectual consideration of the problem necessarily yields such a stance: "whether death is good or evil, a punishment or a reward, or whether it be wholly indifferent, no man can take upon himself to assert" (*Complete Works*, VI, 185). This backpedaling represents a remarkable departure from the almost contemptuous decisiveness of 1818's "On A Future State," where Shelley had announced that "the

dead indeed cease to be." What we see emerge is a certain philosophical squeamishness that is in striking contrast to the "bravado" that marks the poem's early accounts of physical death.[29]

Elsie Mayer's textual history of the poem makes clear Shelley's structural attention to this thematic inconclusiveness. An 1819 version of the poem from the Huntington Notebooks, she argues, is (with the exception of a few short passages early in the poem) "substantively the same" as the 1820 fair copy. However, the 1820 version adds the last fragmentary line ("Whilst—") to 1819's final "The child & Ocean still smile on each other . . ." (line 168). Mayer argues that "Both versions . . . were deliberately left incomplete with the addition of 'Whilst—' to the fair copy emphasizing fragmentation."[30] It may even be possible to see in this structural device a response to the narrative decisiveness of the Mariner, whose glittering eye guarantees that when his story is told it will be told in its entirety. Shelley's very inability to fulfill his poem's inquiry becomes similarly written into his poem's narrative architecture.

The frustrated resignation that Shelley would seem to feel about his still unanswered founding question is most directly confronted in "On Life." Here Shelley addresses the intellectual dilemmas that keep him at sea between purely mechanistic and traditionally Christian world views, both "doubt[ing] and desir[ing] a higher causality,"[31] and as the essay unfolds it seems to track the progression and development of "A Vision of the Sea." Shelley describes his own mechanistic worldview, visible in the opening of his poem, as an early response to the sanctimonies of theism: "The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, and its fatal consequences in morals, their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism" ("On Life," p. 476). He then dismisses the intellectual integrity of this philosophy, in the process illuminating his attempt in the latter half of "A Vision of the Sea" to amend its opening account of a narrowly material cosmos. Materialism is, he suggests, ultimately sophistic, "a seducing system to young and superficial minds" (p. 476). What follows is, in effect, a lit-

29. Ketcham, 58.
30. Mayer, 18.
31. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process*, p. 43.

eral transcription of his motives for attempting to broaden the poem's expression of the relationship between humanity and the physical universe: "But I was discontented with such a view of things as it afforded; man is a being of high aspirations 'looking both before and after,' whose 'thoughts that wander through eternity,' disclaim alliance with transience and decay" (p. 476). As remarkably helpful as these passages are in clearing away any remaining doubt about the perplexities of "A Vision of the Sea," Shelley is at his most self-revealing in his account of the enormous difficulty that the poet faces in investigating these perplexities through art. His acknowledgement of both the near-incomprehensibility of his poem's thematic journey and of the eventual disappointment of his poem's empirical investigation is crystallized in "On Life"'s confession of the limits of poetic practice: "How vain it is to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being" ("On Life," p. 475).

What is finally clear about the evolution of Shelley's skepticism in "A Vision of the Sea" is that even when attempting to submit to the sometimes brutal truths of a natural philosophy, and even while recognizing the often demoralizing nature of "chance and death and mutability" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III.iv.201), Shelley, like the woman in his poem, maintains the will to hope and live. "On Life" speaks of this will:

> Whatever may be [man's] true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution (change and extinction). This is the character of all life and being.—Each is at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained. ("On Life," p. 476)

This, also, seems to be the legacy of "A Vision of the Sea." In recontextualizing the spiritual conundrums of Coleridge's poem it confronts, and at times advances, the proposition that death (and perhaps by implication life itself) is an event devoid of significance, meaning, or sense. And yet once Shelley has structured his own scene of human isolation, he seeks a position both hopeful and intellectually responsible, and one that dignifies and affirms his resilient and deeply felt belief that a "mortal shape [may be] indued / With love and life and light and deity" ("Epipsychidion," lines 112–13). What is left at

the poem's conclusion, then, is not so much the "Vision" promised in the poem's title, but the lingering hope that someday that vision will come.

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