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Mary Shelley as Elegiac Poet: The Return and 'The Choice.'

The poem 'The Choice', along with 'On Reading Wordsworth's Lines on Peel Castle' and a fragment 'To Jane', was written into the back of the 'Journal of Sorrow' (Journal IV) that Mary Shelley kept in the first two years after P. B. Shelley's death. The way in which the poem was written into the journal is complicated. It appears to have been written in, then cut out, then restored again.[1] Another version of the poem was left by Mary Shelley with the Hunts when she returned to England in 1823 and was first published by H. Buxton Forman in 1876 as *The Choice: A Poem on Shelley's Death, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley [etc.]* (*Literary Lives*, iv. xxx-xxxi). In the journal entry before the three poems are transcribed, the last entry of Journal Four, Mary Shelley speaks of winter passing and a rising of spirits 'from desperation to happiness.'[2] It ascribes this feeling mainly to 'affection' for Percy Florence, and it ends, incomplete, with the following: '[?] [?] I now returned to [?] [?].'[3] A careful reader of Mary Shelley learns to register these apparently pre-significatory moments when writing breaks down or breaks off. They are frequently, in fact, moments when writing makes itself most visible. This is one such occasion. Since despite missing pages, lost links, evidential signs and signatures, the apparently pre-significatory '[?] [?] I now returned to [?] [?]' can be read as a telling authorial gloss on the poem which follows. 'The Choice', in both its Journal and Hunt/Forman versions, is about returning, about *the return*. It is elegiac, of course. As A. A. Markley notes, giving the poem in two brief pages perhaps the most

serious critical and scholar attention it has yet received, it is also (at least in terms of its title) related to the tradition of 'Choice' poem stemming from Horace's Satire Book 2.[4] Markley also notes the poem's intertextual connection to poetry by P. B. Shelley, especially *Epipsychidion*, and Leigh Hunt's poem 'The Choice' published in *The Liberal* in the year (1823) in which Mary Shelley composed her poem of that title.[5] More straightforwardly, the poem is about returning. The word 'return' is placed conspicuously, both in syntactical and lineal terms, at the end of the tenth line of the first twenty-line verse paragraph.[6]

The word *return* and the concept of *the return* are part of Mary Shelley's voice as a writer, part of what we might call her signature. We have in this word a sign (or clue) of the aesthetic complexity which lies behind such apparently confessional and 'personal' texts as 'The Choice.' In *Matilda*, for example, the word occurs frequently, merging with the theme of wandering and straying to generate a complex structure which revolves around Mathilda's overdetermined relations with her father and then Woodville.[7] The father's return to his daughter turns out to be a wandering from her (psychologically returning her to her mother). At the point of crisis, after the father's expression of illicit love, Mathilda imagines the father wandering for another sixteen years in Europe. Mathilda imagines saying to her father: 'Go, Devoted one, and return thus! – This is my curse, a daughter's curse: go, and return pure to thy child, who will never love ought but thee.'[8] By this stage of the text, it is clear that for Mathilda every return is also a wandering from her. It is interesting that in *Valperga*, as Euthanasia leaves Beatrice to visit a sick friend, we find exactly the same combination of returning and wandering: '"Go, kind friend", said she to Euthanasia, "go; but return again."'[9] We can relate these

fictional expressions of the ambivalent relation between wandering and returning (noting that this temporally non-linear sequence is part of the subject of this reading) to a very clear structure in Mary Shelley's thought immediately after the death of P. B. Shelley. She says to Byron in a letter posted around 30th March 1823: 'I wait with no pleasant expectation for the result of my father's deliberations—it little matters which way he decides for either to go or to stay are equally disagreeable to me in the situation I now am.'[10] In a letter to Trelawny of around 5th April 1823, responding to his description of removing Shelley's ashes to their final resting place, and also referring to the final decision that she will return to England, Mary Shelley declares: '—I go—with great regret—yet less than I once had—in poverty & dependence Italy loses half its charms, if I live I shall return able to do all here that I desire—If not—still shall I return.' There is no choice about returning, since 'my never resting thoughts are ever beside His Tomb' (*Letters*, i, 327).

This preamble can help us gain some measure of the importance of the word *return* as it makes itself visible before and then in the first verse paragraph of her poem 'The Choice.'[11]

> My Choice! My choice—alas was had & gone
> With the red gleam of the last summer's sun—
> Lost in the deep in which he bathed his head,
> My choice, my life, my hope together fled:—
> A wanderer—here, no more I seek an home
> The sky a vault—& Italy a tomb!
> Yet as some days a pilgrim I remain

Linked to my orphan child by duty's chain;
And since I have a faith that I must earn
By suffering & by patience, a return
Of that companionship & love, which first
Upon my young life's cloud, like sunlight burst,
And now has left me dark as when its beams,
Quench[']d by the might of dreadful ocean streams,
Leave that one cloud, a gloomy speck on high,
Beside one star in the else darkened sky;—
Since I must live, how would I pass the day,
How meet with fewest tears the morning's ray
How sleep with calmest dreams, how find delights
—As fire:flies gleam through interlunar nights!— (1-20)

Having established the importance of this word, we might be tempted to employ it in a synecdochal fashion, allowing it to stand as an exemplum for the poem's overall formal and thematic coherence, its achieved, aesthetic form. In doing so we might feel that we were righting a wrong and returning the poem to its deserved critical reception, after almost two centuries of neglect and misinterpretation. We might even feel that in so doing we were performing a part in a greater return, a return to Mary Shelley as a significant Romantic and post-Romantic writer with her own thematic and formal coherence and writerly signature. This return to Mary Shelley, as Nora Crook remarks, has been going on since the 1970s, so that she cites various phases it can be seen to have passed through.[12] Crook sees the current phase as an 'inclusive one', which is desirous to

'pay close attention to what she has to impart to us from behind her many veils' (Crook, xxv). Such a phase of reception could be seen as one which having established a writer's literary importance begins to look throughout her work for signs of aesthetic, socio-political and literary coherence. Such a phase, in other words, begins to attempt to define a canonical writer's signature or voice, to really return to a writer in minute particular. 'The Choice' appears to have many things to offer such a critical return, a return which, as I have suggested, can be based on and depart from the multiplicity of meanings which appear to attach themselves to the word *return* in Mary Shelley's oeuvre. It is a word, however, which also can alert us to the complexities such a critical and historical return (to Mary Shelley) might involve.

Focusing on *the return* in 'The Choice' allows us to see the poem as something more than a simple, pre-aesthetic articulation of grief and remorse. It allows us, in fact, to begin to register some of the profound ways in which Mary Shelley treats the issue of mourning. The reading I present here has two phases. The first phase looks at the poem as an elegy, but works through to an understanding of the precise form in which Mary Shelley presents her elegy for her husband and for William Shelley, her lost son. The second phase registers what the logic of the return means for Mary Shelley's choice in this text.

Despite the fact that Hunt's 'The Choice' exploits far more openly the tradition of choice poem, in which a place to live is chosen and a mode of life is imagined, it is worth following Markley's description of Mary Shelley's poem as the fusion of elegy with this lesser known poetic sub-genre. (*Literary Lives,* iv, xxx) Remembering the choice Mary

Shelley makes of the choice poem, as I will demonstrate, alerts us to complexities within the elegiac dimension of the text otherwise missed by readers.

Constance Walker has remarked on 'Mary Shelley's uncharacteristic decision to use verse' in 'The Choice' and suggests this choice might be born out of 'a desperate desire to keep P. B. Shelley alive by incorporating him and becoming a poet herself.'[13] If we pay attention to the first verse paragraph, however, we will see that the 'incorporation' involved in this poem involves P. B. Shelley's poetic voice in ways which establish the main terms of the entire poem's expression of mourning. The voice which speaks in this first section of the poem is an 'I', figured as a 'cloud', which rather characteristically of the tradition of the elegy transforms the Other that is being mourned into an agent of nature. It is important to note how P. B. Shelley is figured here, beginning as a 'sun' which irradiated the poetic addresser only to set 'Quench['ld by the might of dreadful ocean streams', then becoming a rather characteristically 'Shelleyan' 'one star' in a night which the speaker wishes to continue, since the rising of the sun now marks the Other's absence.

Whatever we wish to say at this stage about the mournful, even melancholic voice which speaks in this poem, it needs to be registered that the manner in which the Other is naturalistically apostrophised is in many ways characteristically 'Shelleyan', down to the last line's '—As fire:flies gleam through interlunar nights!'[14] In his *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of his many addresses on the death of academic and intellectual friends, Jacques Derrida continually returns to the problem of how to speak of the Other, referring to what he calls 'the violence of quotation.'[15] How does one quote the Other one mourns, particularly if that Other is a famous writer (and one's address is then some form

of public elegy) without betraying, through cuts and elisions, the spirit of the work of the Other? How does one do justice to the Other, however, without quoting their words and, in a sense, speaking in their own voice? To speak of the Other purely in one's own words is to betray them by losing their own unique voice. To quote the other is to betray the voice of the Other through 'the violence of quotation.' A typical Derridean aporia then, which in many ways goes straight to the heart of the complexities faced by the poet who would mourn for and apostrophise the Other through elegy. The problem raised here also includes the question of intertextuality within the writing of an elegy. The 'one star' figure, for example, involves the alert reader in a host of intra- and intertextual connections, which include Mary Shelley's figuration of William Shelley as the 'evening star' (96), her reference to the 'strange star' of her own birth, and a deliberate set of allusions to P. B. Shelley's elegy for Keats, *Adonais*.[16] One might ask, after registering the complex intertextual dimension of such figures, how one can ever hope to responsibly quote the words of a poet such as P. B. Shelley?; how one can ever quote them, that is, without them wandering off into networks of figurative connections which threaten to lose the very voice one would mournfully cite?

Mary Shelley appears to negotiate the problem of the voice of the Other in elegiac work by apostrophising Shelley into the kind of mutating natural imagery (natural images troping upon natural images) which is characteristic of his own writing.[17] Yet she does this not in order to perform that traditional transference of power from the Other to the living poet associated with the male tradition of elegiac poetry. Rather, this is an 'incorporation' which physically, naturally projects Shelley outside of the speaker's mourning non-self and gives all vitality and all life back to that Other. Shelley returns in

this poem as an affective agent who cannot but display the lack of agency in the speaker who has, temporarily, 'incorporated' his poetic voice. Reading the poem this way can alert us to levels of irony totally missed by readers who simply write the text off as an emotional outpouring of guilt.[18] We can perhaps register this irony in the manner in which the beginning of the second verse paragraph quietly comments on the process of 'incorporation' which the poem has already effected:

> First, let me call on thee, lost as thou art
> Thy name aye fills my sense, thy love my heart— (21-22)

It is as a poetic subject who has been 'filled' with the 'name' of an Other that the poet of 'The Choice' speaks; a subject whose 'sense' derives not from themselves but from an apostrophised ('incorporated') Other who irradiates and dims their identity:

> Oh! Gentle Spirit, thou has[t] often sung
> How fall'n on evil days thy heart was wrung;
> Now fierce remorse and unreplying death
> Waken a cord within my heart, whose breath,
> Thrilling and keen, in accents audible,
> A tale of unrequited love doth tell. (23-28)

These lines are a remarkable testament to the ironies involved in elegy or what Derrida, after Freud, calls the work of mourning. Mourning an Other who is 'unreplying' because lost they speak in the voice of the Other, which 'Waken a cord within [the] heart', so that the confessional tale of 'unrequited love' the poem now announces seems to come from the Other, its 'Thrilling and keen' 'accents audible.' Without labouring the obvious point that Mary Shelley's poetic voice is one which incorporates and projects, elegiacally

apostrophises, the voice of P. B. Shelley, it can be said that the mourning subject in this poem is a reversible subject. What I mean by that is that this speaking subject, as the first verse paragraph so dramatically demonstrates, is a subject who is dependent upon the animating force of an Other now, classically, figured as a natural and even divine affective influence. Mary Shelley's poetic 'I' is animated here by a 'thrilling and keen' 'breath' or afflatus (influence) which is 'Shelleyan.' A transference occurs in these lines which is typical of the elegiac tradition, only in this female version of the agonistic male tradition of elegy it is not power that is transferred, not ingested breath, or afflatus, or what Harold Bloom calls 'Influenza—an astral disease', but 'fierce remorse.'[19] This is a female version of the return which Bloom views as essentially conflictual but which here is confessional and seeks not for poetic 'strength' or 'power' but simply for the impossible event of the literal return of the Other.[20] It is not an inconsiderable thing to say that in this poem the impossible event does in fact occur, in that Mary Shelley's poetic 'I' speaks in an incorporated and apostrophising poetic voice to her Other who cannot hear and return and yet, here, in the text, does hear and does return. Mary Shelley, by elegiacally returning to the voice of P. B. Shelley, allows for that impossible scene of speaking in which she speaks to her lost Other, her lost husband, incorporated, re-turned, within herself, her own 'uncharacteristic' voice. As she writes half way down the second verse paragraph:

> Forgive me! Let thy love descend in dew
> Of soft repentance and regret most true:—
> In strange guise thou dost descend—or how
> Could love soothe fell remorse?—as it does now!— (39-42)

It might be objected that all I am doing so far in this reading is to prove that Mary Shelley was conscious of writing an elegy. This would be something, considering the neglect the text has experienced down the years. However, I have made greater claims about the function of *the return* in the text, and to begin to substantiate these one must notice the reversibility of the mourning subject who speaks in the text. We have already noted the manner in which the poetic subject, incorporating the voice of the Other, apostrophises that Other as agent, either of renewed life or of denudation and absence of meaning. We need to pass over some of the 'confessional' aspects of the poem here, although we will return to some of them later, to think about the nature of the choice which is made in this poem. As Markley reminds us, despite her actual choice to return to England, the choice staged in this poem is to remain in Italy (*Literary Lives*, iv, xxx).[21] Italy itself has already manifested a stark reversibility in the poem, beginning as 'a tomb' but represented at the end of the second verse paragraph as 'my adopted land, my country, Italy!' (60). One could write many pages on the manner in which Italy stands for a form of reversibility in Mary Shelley's work. The text which perhaps most significantly comes to mind here, however, is her novel of mourning, her monumental elegy for P. B. Shelley, Byron and others, *The Last Man*. At the end of that novel, as readers will know, Lionel Verney, the last man alive on the planet, wanders through Rome, now depopulated, but capable of being imaginatively repopulated. The important scene in which Verney, sitting 'at the foot' of the 'vast columns of The Coliseum' forces himself to see, as in a 'Diorama of the ages', the whole of ancient Rome repopulated, including the Campo Vaccino, the Forum and the Capitol, before the vision fades into 'the vacant space around me', would be testament enough to the manner in which Rome in particular

came to symbolise a topos of imaginative reversibility for Mary Shelley.[22] Perdita, in that same novel, wishes to remain in the Greece of her husband's death; Mary Shelley's mourning subject chooses an Italy which has within it the potential of reversibility, an imaginative repopulation or apostrophising speech which England, the alternative for both Mary Shelley and her character, Perdita, does not possess.

Italy, for Mary Shelley, is a reversible place, a place of returning, a place in which the impossible event of mourning (speaking directly to the Other who is lost) can occur.[23] It is precisely this aspect of Italy that provides the basis for Mary Shelley's mourning of William and P. B. Shelley in the long third and then the fourth verse paragraphs. The presentation of William's death is of course hugely significant and we might say already over-determined with poetic and biographical resonances.[24] Constance Walker has discussed the manner in which Mary Shelley in 'The Choice' and other 'conventionally' elegiac texts, utilizes elegy's tradition of mitigating death, turning it into sleep, denying its finality, and so on. (Walker, 138-9) Walker misses, however, the manner in which Mary Shelley, reversing the classical idea of mothers falling in love with statues, alluded to in Asia's long mythico-historical speech in *Prometheus Unbound*, reinforces the potential for reversibility she associated with Italy and Italian art.[25] As Markley reminds us, Mary Shelley had described in letters William's delight on seeing the statues at the Vatican. (*Literary Lives*, iv, 119; *Letters*, I, 91, 93) Italy and Italian art, once again in Mary Shelley's writing, come to signify an impossible return or reversibility, in which life and art are interchangeable, in which art and the imaginative response it inspires can re-people a vacancy, and in which what appears to be life can be taken back into the realm of art and thus 'Eternity.' She writes of how William:

Had gazed with infant wonder on the grace
Of stone wrought deities, and pictured saints,
In Rome's high palaces:—there were no taints
Of ruin on his cheek—all shadowless
Grim death approached—the boy met his caress,
And while his glowing limbs with life's warmth shone,
Around those limbs his icy arms were thrown.
His spoils were strewed beneath the soil of Rome,
Whose flowers now star the dark earth near his tomb. (80-88)

William, as we know, does not, and did not by 1823, lie beneath 'his tomb.' William's lack of a determinable resting place, his general presence within the Protestant Cemetery and in Rome generally, allows for a naturalisation of his spirit and adds to the sense of Italy in general and Rome in particular as a place of reversibility in which what is lost returns in every aspect and every feature of the place of choice. Italy, and especially Rome, is the place of choice for the poetic speaker of 'The Choice' because it is the place of reversibility, of an impossible apostrophe, an impossible (apart from in this place) return. If we had not recognised this logic and this structure by now, the next sections (103-137), in which Mary Shelley returns to her lost husband, should convince us. Italy here is the place of choice, since it is here and only here in which Shelley's spirit returns. To Constance Walker's thesis that Mary Shelley wished to soften or erase death in this and other elegiac poems, we can here make the counter-suggestion that the following lines are place specific, they are the hard won topoi of a mourning but also aesthetically self-conscious poetic voice. They are lines which we might begin to recognise as a gift or

return of P. B. Shelley's own voice, and particularly the voice of *Adonais*; a return which is not a repetition so much as an 'incorporation' and mournful *apophrades*[26]:

> Tell me, ye ancient walls, and weed:grown towers,
> Ye Roman airs, and brightly painted flowers,
> Does not his spirit visit that recess
> Which built by love, enshrines his earthly dress?
> —No more! No more! What tho' that form be fled
> —My trembling hands shall never write thee—dead—
> Thou liv'st in Nature—love – my Memory,
> With deathless faith for aye adoring thee—
> The wife of time no more—I wed Eternity— (113-121)

Rome is not the vast 'sepulchre' of *Adonais* here, it is in fact the place of the 'Eternal' and in that sense is a place of death and also of the triumph over death, or what I have been calling *the return*. It is precisely a place in which a choice, about how to relate to the dead, can be made. It is important to register the manner in which this merging of the two senses of the word 'Eternal' in *Adonais* (Rome, Heaven) revises the logic or structure of mourning, what Peter M. Sacks calls 'the stellar imagery of consolation', in P. B. Shelley's great elegy to Keats.[27] In *Adonais* Rome is the mediating place for the Eternal, the place which, in stanza 52, 'transfuse[s]' the truth, and in this sense is synonymous with 'life' in that climactic stanza's most famous lines: 'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,/ Stains the white radiance of Eternity,/ Until Death tramples it to fragments' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 405). For Mary Shelley in 'The Choice' Rome (and Italy beyond that) *is* the place of the Eternal. The choice made in this poem ('I wed Eternity')

is to remain in the place of the return, the place in which those who are dead still linger and still return. What is at stake here, for Mary Shelley, is a reworking, or to employ Bloomian phraseology a transumptive refiguring, of the lines from *Adonais* which were to haunt her after Shelley's death: 'I would give/ All that I am to be as thou now art!/ But I am chained to Time, and cannot now depart!' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 398).[28] Choosing Rome is the equivalent, so the poem suggests, to choosing Eternity, since this place (Rome, but particularly the Protestant Cemetry) *is* Eternity and so offers the wished-for release from the 'chains' of 'Time.'

It is at this point, however, as the poem begins to move to its conclusion, that we need to remember that the 'sub-genre' of the choice poem involves not only a choice of place but also a chosen mode of life. By this stage, the choice of lifestyle in the poem seems patently clear. There are numerous instances in Mary Shelley's fiction of characters who choose to dedicate what life remains to the act or work of mourning: one might think, for example, of Mathilda, of Perdita, of Clarice/Ellen in 'The Mourner', of a number of the characters in *Lodore* and *Falkner*, and, of course, Lionel Verney, narrator of *The Last Man*.[29] This choice appears obvious from the section of the poem we have just been discussing. However, we must be careful here. Once again, it is not advisable to take mourning as a simple process and a straightforward concept in the work of Mary Shelley. It is here that the second phase of my reading begins. Having apparently chosen Italy as a place to live and a mode of existence to be pursued there, i.e. mourning, the poetic speaker then concludes the Journal version of the poem with the following:

> Here will I live within a little dell,
>
> Which but a month ago I saw full well;

A dream then pictured forth the solitude,
Deep in the shelter of a lovely wood:—
A voice then whispered a strange prophesy—
My dearest widowed friend—that thou and I
Should there together pass the livelong day
As we have done before in Spezia's bay (138-145)

Now addressing Jane Williams, Mary Shelley ends the Journal version with a poetic account of an actual dream she recorded in a letter to Jane Williams dated April 10th 1823 (*Letters*, I, 328-332). In this letter Mary Shelley explains the complex reasons why she feels she must return to England with Percy Florence: 'A number of circumstances impel my return', she writes, before adding, 'And yet I may be wrong there. I own that with all drawbacks I fancy I could maintain myself better here than there' (*Letters*, I, 328). Mary writes of Byron's advice about returning home, about Shelley's father's insistence that Percy Florence be brought back to England, about the prospects for her son on Sir Timothy Shelley's death, about the problems of living under Hunt's roof, about the 'dismal' affairs of *The Liberal*, and then adds:

> I have therefore made up my mind to return after I have seen Marianne safe through her confinement. And now I will no longer annoy you with this ungrateful subject . . . . we will build castles for the future. For instance such a one as I dreamt a few night's ago. First there was Ned & my beloved Shelley, there was a strange bustle—suddenly you and I became such as we are, and we prepared to return to England—I saw the boxes pact & all the preparations for a journey when I thought that you and I turned down a pathway that led through a

> wood beneath the brow of a rocky hill. Imagination cannot conceive any thing more lovely than this spot; which has haunted me ever since. By its vegetation it must have been Italy—the rich foliage of the trees—the verdure of the grass, the beauty of the flowers, the picturesque & tree grown rock—are all before me—& we were told that we were to remain there until our reunion with our lost ones. If I do not die I trust I shall one day be independent—when I hope that all that nature can do to heal our wounds, she will perform (*Letters*, I, 329).

Mary Shelley's dream here returns her to texts she has previously written, in particular to *Matilda*, her unpublished manuscript in which a mourning female subject wanders, after the death of her Other (her father), into an intertextual dimension which includes a series of other wandering texts and wandering subjects, including her own earlier version of that text, 'The Fields of Fancy', a text modelled on her mother's own unfinished 'The Cave of Fancy', along with Dante's Matelda from the *Purgatorio*, Dante's wandering poet himself, and the classical female wanderer Proserpine, whom Mary Shelley had also devoted a child-oriented text to in 1820.[30] This is not the end of the intertextual dimensions of Mary Shelley's dream, however, since it also clearly involves poetry by P. B. Shelley. The most obvious 'Shelleyan' intertext, if we follow Markley's lead, is *Epipsychidion*, Mary Shelley's desire to construct 'castles for the future' perhaps returning to P. B. Shelley's 'isle under Ionian skies' with its 'pleasure-house' growing 'Out of the mountains, from the living stone' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 384-6). Certainly, the Horatian rural ideal so clearly present in the last sections of *Epipsychidion* might make us aware of a generic link (in terms of the choice poem) between Mary Shelley's elegy and P. B. Shelley's famous love poem. However, another potential

intertext is, if followed, far more telling. I am thinking here of the last of the introductory lines to *The Triumph of Life*:

> the Deep
> Was at my feet, and Heaven above my head
> When a strange trance over my fancy grew
> Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread
>
> Was so transparent that the scene came through
> As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
> O'er evening hills they glimmer; and I knew
>
> That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,
> Bathed in the same cold dew my brow and hair
> And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn
>
> Under the self same bough, and heard as there
> The birds, the fountains and the Ocean hold
> Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.
> And then a Vision on my brain was rolled . . . . (*Shelley's Poetry*, 456).

The significance of the strange déjà vu which the poet of *The Triumph of Life* experiences is obviously a major part of any interpretation of that hugely complex and compelling poem. Readers of Mary Shelley's writing, however, might well feel more familiar with such uncanny moments of return; that is, with moments in which places and

events uncover a process of repetition and return which belies common sense notions of contingency and temporal order. Mary Shelley's Beatrice, for example, in *Valperga*, is eventually destroyed by the return of a dream, never wholly explicable, which has, before the fatal climax of her life, returned to her disturbed imagination time and time again. Mary Shelley herself on a number of occasions allows that the major events of her life appear to be returns to events and situations in her fiction. Mary Shelley's comments in letters to Maria Gisborne in the autumn of 1822 and in 1823 about the prophetic nature of *Matilda* are perhaps the most well known examples (*Letters*, I, 247, 336). In the latter, in fact, she remarks not only on the prophetic quality of *Matilda* as a text but also the drowning at sea of Euthanasia at the end of *Valperga*. Speaking of the latter text, she writes:

> Is not the catastrophe strangely prophetic But it seems to me that in what I have hitherto written I have done nothing but prophecy what has arrived to. Matilda fortells even many small circumstances most truly—& the whole of it is a monument of what now is—

She signs off, asking Maria Gisborne to 'Give my very tenderest love to Jane when you see her' (*Letters*, I, 336).

The second phase of our reading of 'The Choice' in terms of the concept of *the return* leads us to this prophetic, uncanny sense of life's imitation of art, so strong at least at this stage of Mary Shelley's life. More significantly it begins to alert us to something that has been evident throughout 'The Choice.' What is returned to in this poem is frequently figured as a place or state, a person or a relation, which in itself lacked full presence, and already partook of the uncanny logic of the return. What Mary Shelley

chose to return to in her elegiac, mourning poem was, in its first instance, already possessed of the logic of the return, was already in itself non-originary. We could note the negative associations which circle around the 'cloud' image Mary Shelley gives to herself at the very beginning of the poem. Even in their first meeting and their initial period of courtship, Mary, it would seem, was a negative subject, a subject already marked by loss or absence, appropriately figured by a 'cloud' which changes due to external influence. We can go further in fact, noting that in lines 36-39 Mary Shelley figures herself as someone who was not fully present during her time with P. B. Shelley and who is now beyond any capacity for full, singular presence:

> My heart was all thine own—but yet a shell
> Closed in its core, which seemed impenetrable,
> Till sharp:toothed Misery tore the husk in twain
> Which gaping lies nor may unite again—

It is in this way, registering the lack of full presence Mary mourns in her own self and history, that we can understand the full import of the extended reference to the comet associated with her birth, first identified in July 1797 by the King's Assistant Astronomer, Caroline Herschel[31]:

> And thou, strange Star! Ascendant at my birth
> Which rained, they said, kind influence on the earth,
> So from great parents sprung I dared to boast
> Fortune my friend, till set, thy beams were lost! (51-4)

Mary Shelley reminds us here, via P. B. Shelley's image of her in *Laon and Cythna* as 'child of love and light', that the meaning of her existence from the very first

was relational, dependent on her parents' own achievements and socio-symbolic status. Mourning, if it concerns a lack in the self, seems to have always existed for the speaker of this poem *in herself*. In a similar fashion the Other mourned by Mary Shelley in this poem was himself, when alive, somehow more and less than a full presence:

> Thy very weakness was my tower of strength—
> Methought thou wert a spirit from the sky,
> Which struggled with its chains, yet could not die,
> And that destruction had no power to win,
> From out those limbs the soul that burnt within. (108-12)

The poem mourns an Other who was never simply present when alive, and it does so in the voice of a speaking subject who herself was always characterised by the logic of the return, by a significance other than her own. The poetic voice which chooses to return to Italy and thus to her husband and her lost children in 'The Choice' knows that what one returns to was already a return, rather than a literal, unique and undifferentiated presence or meaning.

This aspect of the poem, its figuration of P. B. Shelley as a 'spirit' which returns and as a poet who was a 'spirit' when alive, connects 'The Choice' with a vast network of personal, public and ultimately cultural figurations of 'Shelley.' Mary Shelley asks the 'ancient walls' around the Protestant Cemetery 'Does not his spirit visit that recess/ Which built by love, enshrines his earthly dress?' (115-6). This apparently consolatory thought and basis for the choice of Rome and Italy, actually involves the return of a spirit, rather the return of a man *as a spirit*. The figuration of Shelley as a visiting star and as a deity run throughout Mary Shelley's letters and journal writing of this period (*Letters*, I,

252). The journal entry most directly linked to this critical engagement with 'The Choice' concerns Mary Shelley's frequent recourse to the latter figuration. On October 10th 1822 she writes: 'One thing excites at the same time my keenest grief, horror &, in spite of me, my indignation;—When people dare talk to me as they would of another similarly circumstanced. When did before did (sic) a spirit of the elements, taking an earthly dress, select one of this world for his mate? There are traditions of such events & the chosen one [pines – delete through] was by that choice lifted if not above yet apart from her fellows. I feel thus—I shall never be as one of them & they must feel that' (*Journals*, 445). P. B. Shelley was, that is to say, a spirit from the first. He was, when alive, a revenant and in that sense partook of the strange temporal logic of spirits and spectres discussed by Derrida in various texts, including his *Specters of Marx*: 'Given that a *revenant* is always called upon to come and to come back, the thinking of the specter, contrary to what good sense leads us to believe, signals towards the future. It is a thinking of the past, a legacy that can come only from that which has not yet arrived—from the *arrivant* itself.'[32] The revenant, Derrida argues here and elsewhere, is a spirit who returns from the future: a revenant is also an *arrivant*. We might think here of a number of texts in which Mary Shelley returns to this figure of Shelley as returning spirit, as in, for example, her preface to the *Posthumous Poems* published in 1824. Echoing her description of the loss at sea of Euthanasia in *Valperga*, a scene which as we have seen she had already noted as prophetic of P. B. Shelley's death, Mary Shelley writes:

> The ungrateful world did not feel his loss, and the gap it made seemed to close as quickly over his memory as the murderous sea above his living frame. Hereafter men will lament that his transcendent powers of intellect were extinguished

> before they had bestowed on them their choicest treasures. To his friends his loss is irremediable . . . . He is to them as a bright vision, whose radiant track, left behind in memory, is worth all the realities that society can afford. (*Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 238)

Like Mary Shelley's own imagined character, Euthanasia, P. B. Shelley is figured here and in 'The Choice' as a spirit who returns and as an *arrivant* who comes too early, who arrives in a world unable as yet, as things are, to greet and understand him. The thought of P. B. Shelley as an *arrivant* who arrives (returns) too soon, as a star whose 'bright track' bedims the reality of this world, might also remind us here (and the connections are clearly more than coincidental) of Leigh Hunt's own version of this figuring of Shelley as alien (a 'spirit from the sky') in his *Autobiography*:

> He was like a spirit that had darted out of his orb, and found itself in another world. I used to tell him that he had come from the planet Mercury. When I heard of the catastrophe that overtook him, it seemed as if this spirit, not sufficiently constituted like the rest of the world, to obtain their sympathy, yet gifted with a double portion of love for all living things, had been found dead in a solitary corner of the earth, its wings stiffened, its warm heart cold; the relics of a misunderstood nature, slain by the ungenial elements.[33]

Mary Shelley writes of P. B. Shelley to Jane Williams:

> I was never the Eve of any Paradise, but a human creature blessed by an elemental spirit's company & love—an angel who imprisoned in flesh could not adapt himself to his clay shrine & so has flown & left it—& I feel as poets have described those loved by superhuman creatures & then deserted by them—

> Impatient, despairing—& resting only on the moment when he will return to me. (*Letters*, I, 264)

Shelley, we notice, however, was a spirit from the beginning, and so not simply present even before he was lost and positioned to return again. In the same letter, rounding off, Mary Shelley writes: 'After loving him I could only love another angel like him—but I could not even love another angel loving him alone' (*Letters*, I, 264-5).

Recent criticism of Mary Shelley has treated her mourning work with a certain anxiety, no doubt because the subject appears to drag us back towards the Victorian mythology of the widowed woman writer against which most of the important moves in interpretation and editorial recovery of her work have been pitted in the past thirty years.[34] Without an attention to her mourning work, however, we remain in danger of missing at least part of what is most unique and most challenging in her work, pre- and post-1822; we also, without such an attention, miss some of the most compelling aesthetic (intertextual as well as psychological) connections between her literary work and her 'private' writing.

Markley, in discussing the alternative endings in the Hunt/Forman and the Journal versions of 'The Choice', suggests that the omission of the last fourteen lines in the latter was deliberate and probably arose from a sense that 'to end with Edward Williams was to give him more prominence than her children and husband' (*Literary Lives*, iv, xxxi) I would suggest that the strange temporal structure of the return staged in the Journal version's closing verse paragraph—*'Here I will live' where I was already 'but a month ago,' here we will choose to live as we lived before*—precisely captures the poem's presentation of the strange logic of *the return*. What is returned to was in itself already a

return. What one mourns already contained mourning within it, from the beginning. The Hunt/Forman version of the poem is perhaps in this sense more traditionally elegiac in holding out the hope of a 'final home' which will release the elegist and her lost Others from the state of returning. Such a conventional consolatory hope is evident in Mary Shelley's later writing, when discussing, for example, P. B. Shelley's 'Essay on a Future State' in her 1840 preface to his *Essays, Letters from Abroad and Fragments*. However, it seems to me that the manner in which the Journal version of 'The Choice' concludes (with the strange déjà vu of the dream) is perfectly in tune with the logic of the return developed throughout the poem.

What Mary Shelley mourns for in 'The Choice' was never simply there in the past, or rather the past present. The relationship with P. B. Shelley, her husband-poet himself, her own originally mourning self: all these things now mourned and returned to possessed within themselves, from the beginning, the strange logic of the return. Mary Shelley in her elegy for her husband knows that what one would return to was in itself, *as* itself, a return. 'The Choice' is an elegy which questions the basis of traditional elegy and rethinks the traditional understanding of mourning. To look for Mary Shelley within 'The Choice', as if we could return to a voice which was ever simply present to itself, is a mistake. To read the poem as if it is a simple, uncomplicated return to the past and to the life and work of P. B. Shelley, as if that life and work could be simply and literally *returned to*, is equally naïve. To read the poem as an elegiac apostrophe to a revenant (a 'spirit') who is also an *arrivant*, to read it as a poem which calls to an Other from the past who might still arrive, is perhaps to get somewhere. Mourning, in Mary Shelley, is not

simply a psychological phenomenon; it is, also, literary, intertextual, phenomenological, above all, uncanny. It deserves to be returned to.

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[1] See *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore and London, 1995), 490-4. For the history of the poem's inclusion and excision from the journal see A. A. Markley's comments in *Mary Shelley's 'Literary Lives' and Other Writings*, gen. ed. Nora Crook (4 vols, London, 2002), iv. xxix-xxxi, lxxxv.

[2] The last dated entry is December 3rd 1824. There is a page missing after this entry finishes and then the short undated entry of which I speak. The editors state, that this undated entry must have been written 'no earlier than the summer of 1825.' *Journal*, 489.

[3] [?] denotes unrecovered material.

[4] Johanna M. Smith has, without submitting the poem to a sustained analysis, suggested that it is deserving of such a treatment. She styles it 'the longest and most technically sophisticated of [Mary Shelley's] poems', and adds: 'the poem is more than an autobiographical effusion; rather Shelley turns her own mourning into a sustained exploration of mourning itself.' Johanna M. Smith, *Mary Shelley* (New York, 1996), 25, 27. This last comment is, as this reading of the poem will demonstrate, highly insightful and the main clue to the text itself.

[5] Markley states that 'Mary would have seen' Leigh Hunt's 'The Choice' 'prior to its publication in the fourth number of *The Liberal* (1823)' (*Literary Lives*, iv, xxx). See Leigh Hunt, 'The Choice' in *The Liberal*, 4 (1823), 265-79.

[6] We might note here that the same word, *return*, ends the thematically related poem 'Absence', Shelley's earliest known printed poem, published in *The Keepsake* in 1831 (composed 1830) (*Literary Lives*, iv, xxxii; for the text itself see page 131).

[7] See Graham Allen, 'Beyond Biographism: Mary Shelley's *Matilda*, Intertextuality and the Wandering Subject', *Romanticism*, 3.2 (1997), 170-84.

[8] *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary* Shelley, gen. ed. (8 vols, London, 1996), ii, 30.

[9] *Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, iii, 267.

[10] *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, (3 vols, Baltimore and London, 1980), i, 324.

[11] I will base my analysis on the Journal version of the poem, but will have some things to say about the Hunt/Forman version. The question of what version of 'The Choice' to choose is not one I intend to pose, let alone attempt to answer, on this occasion. Given that Mary Shelley's poetry is still little known and read I am also aware that in not citing the entire text of the poem I should give my readers directions as to where they can find it. Apart from *Journals*, 490-4 and both versions in *Literary Lives*, iv, 117-27, readers will find the Journal version as an appendix in *The Last Man*, ed. Anne McWhir (Peterborough, Ontario, 1996), 405-9 and the Hunt/Forman version in R. Glynn Grylls, *Mary Shelley* (London, 1938), 297-301.

[12] Nora Crook, 'Introduction' to *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From 'Frankenstein' to 'Falkner'*, ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra (London, 2000), xix-xxvi.

[13] Constance Walker, 'Kindertotenlieder: Mary Shelley and the Art of Losing', in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore and London, 2000), 143.

[14] Betty T. Bennett adds to our sense of this 'Shelleyan' poetic voice in 'The Choice' in her brief analyses of the poem's contribution to Mary Shelley's many intertextual references to the aziola. Betty T. Bennett, 'Mary Shelley's Letters: The Public/Private Self', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther Schor (Cambridge, 2003), 222. For another association of fireflies with P. B. Shelley, the reader should look at Leigh Hunt's beautiful description of them in *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London, 1949), 389-90. 'Shelley used to watch them for hours,' he writes (390).

[15] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London, 2001), 59.

[16] The intertextual connection to *Adonais* includes P. B. Shelley's figuration of Keats as a star shining above the realm of death in stanza 44, Adonais's soul, at the very end of the poem, burning 'like a star,/ . . . from the abode where the Eternal are', and the poem's first epigram attributed to Plato ('Thou wert the morning star among the living,/ Ere thy fair light had fled', which also will remind the reader of Shelley's use of the same image in his poem 'To Wordsworth': 'Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine/ On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar'). *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London, 1977), 403, 406, 390-406, 88.

[17] The terms of this naturalistic figuration of P. B. Shelley cannot, however, be separated from quite complex and potentially significant intertextual patterns. For example,

thinking of the way P. B. Shelley is figured as 'one star' and Mary Shelley as 'one cloud', we should note that the cloud image is employed by Shelley as a self-figuring image in the famous section in *Adonais* in which he comes forward out of the mourners: 'Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,/ A phantom among men; companionless/ As the last cloud of an expiring storm/ Whose thunder is its knell' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 399).

[18] See, for example, Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York and London, 1988), 146.

[19] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford and New York, 1973).

[20] Readers will note how Mary Shelley figures P. B. Shelley through the voice of Milton ('fall'n on evil days', *Paradise Lost* vii, 25-6), or, to be more accurate, figures P. B. Shelley through his own use of Milton's self-figuring to figure Godwin in 'Letter to Maria Gisborne': 'You will see/ That which was Godwin,—greater none than he/ Though fallen—and fallen on evil times—to stand/ Among the spirits of our age and land/ Before the dread Tribunal of *to come*/ The foremost . . . while Rebuke cowers pale and dumb' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 318).

[21] The story of Mary Shelley's decision to return to England can be found in her letters and her journals of 1822 and 1823. It is a story involving various complications, including the response to Shelley's death by his father, Sir Timothy Shelley, Byron's well-meaning but changing advice and Mary's deferral of her return until after the safe delivery of Marianne Hunt's seventh child on 9th June 1823. It is very clear, however, despite such complications and considerations that, but for her concern for the future of Percy Florence, Mary Shelley would have chosen, at least initially, to remain in Italy. In a

letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg dated February 28th 1823, for example, she writes of the difficulty of living under the same roof as the Hunts, but also states: 'I love Italy—it [sic] sky canopies the tombs of my lost treasures—its sun—its vegetation . . . . The thought of leaving it fills me with painful tumults—tears come into my eyes—I prognosticate all evils . . . .' (*Letters*, i, 318). This kind of sentiment about Italy is repeated again and again in her journals, reaching a climax as she prepares to leave for England: 'Shall I leave Italy?—Can you not, my Shelley, keep me here?—can you forge no chain to bind me—I would never leave this sky—this earth—even this sea, which forces me, for your sake to love it, but that I must [for – delete through] ↑on↓ our child's [sake – delete through] ↑account↓ . . . .' (*Journals*, 466).

[22] *Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, iv, 358-9.

[23] Mary Shelley's last major work, her *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, is a sustained, compelling testament to how persistent this impression of Italy was for her. The entire work is an act of returning in all the senses to which this current reading attempts to point. Her letters also continually return to Italy as a place of reversibility, a place in which she can imagine the return of the dead: see, for example, her 30th December 1824 letter to Teresa Guiccioli (*Letters*, I, 457-61).

[24] William appears in P. B. Shelley's *Adonais* as the 'infant smile' of 'a slope of green access' and the 'laughing flowers' which grow upon it. As Mary Shelley knew when writing 'The Choice' William's body was no longer buried in his original resting place, a fact which came to light in 1822 on exhuming his grave in order to rebury him with his father in the new grounds of the Protestant Cemetery (*Letters*, I, 257).

[25] The lines in Asia's speech, II, iv, run as follow: 'And human hands first mimicked and then mocked/With moulded limbs more lovely than its own/The human form, till marble grew divine,/And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see/Reflected in their race, behold, and perish' (*Shelley's Poetry*, 174).

[26] I use Harold Bloom's word *apophrades* advisedly. Much of what this reading has been building towards is a sense of the poem's aesthetic complexity and intertextual richness, that is to say the ways in which the dead return (*qua* P. B. Shelley) in 'The Choice.' Whether, in Mary Shelley's poem, the dead return 'in the garments of the living', is precisely the point at issue (See *Anxiety*, 143). It is perhaps worth quoting Bloom's central account of *apophrades* as 'the dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return to inhabit their former houses', but in which 'the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they [the ephebes] are being *imitated by their ancestors*' (*Anxiety*, 141).

[27] Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London, 1985), 146.

[28] For explicit reference to these lines in her letters see *Letters*, I, 254-5, 262, 283.

[29] For 'The Mourner' see *Mary Shelley, Collected Tales and Stories*, ed. Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London, 1976), 81-99.

[30] 'Proserpine' and 'The Fields of Fancy', in *Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ii, 73-91, 351-411; for 'The Cave of Fancy' see *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, (7 vols, London, 1989), i. 191-206.

[31] See Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (London, 2000), 27.

[32] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London, 1994), 196.

[33] Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London, 1949), 331.

[34] For a recent example of this anxiety see Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Screen-Memories and Fictionalized Autobiography: Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* and "The Mourner"', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 27.4 (2005), 365-81.