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Authors	Allen, Graham
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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Apophrades, Adonais, and the Return of the Shelleys

Abstract: This chapter returns to Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, and in particular his notion of apophrades. It does so in the context of a reading of P. B. Shelley's elegy to John Keats, *Adonais.* The chapter argues that Bloom's version of apophrades elides the uncanniness possessed by the original Greek concept; an uncanniness exploited within Shelleys' own poetry.

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Keywords: Harold Bloom. P. B. Shelley. Mary Shelley. Romantic Studies. Literary Theory.

1. The Return of the Dead.

P. B. Shelley is conspicuously present in the last chapter of Bloom's most famous book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. *The Triumph of Life*, meditations on his elegy for Keats, *Adonais*, and, more generally, Shelley's important part in the belated tradition Bloom is summarising and celebrating in this final chapter, all contribute significantly to Bloom's presentation of *apophrades*, the final and most radical of the six revisionary ratios. *Apophrades*, Bloom informs his readers, concerns those "dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return to inhabit their former houses …."[1] However, in what he later calls "positive apophrades," truly "strong" poets manage to reverse the hierarchies implied by this return of the dead, and achieve:

[1] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.141.

> the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater achievement.[2]

By the time of *A Map of Misreading*, *apophrades* has been transformed by Bloom's agon with de Man over defence and trope, psyche and rhetoric, into one of the crucial terms in his account of poetry and poetic strength, namely transumption. In that book Bloom calls transumption (or metalepsis, the metonymic substitution of one word for another word which is itself figurative) "the ultimate poetic resource of belatedness,"[3] going on to describe it in terms of an "imagistic movement," in the strongest of post-Miltonic poems, "from inside/outside polarities to early/late reversals."[4] In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom writes: "Perhaps all Romantic style, at its heights, depends upon a successful manifestation of the dead in the garments of the living …."[5] I want to look again at that statement in the context of the work of both P. B. Shelley and Mary Shelley. I am interested in how certain features of figurative language foregrounded in Bloom's work on apophrades and transumption can be used to give greater seriousness to an issue within Shelley scholarship which has until now been rather lightly cast off as the stuff of mere biography.

It is clear that for Bloom, along with John Hollander, metalepsis has an essentially temporal character.[6] The troping of previous tropes gives us what Hollander calls "a trope of diachrony" which "raises the echo even louder than the original" and frequently does

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2 Ibid.
3 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.101.
4 Ibid.
5 *Anxiety of Influence*, p.143.
6 John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1981).

so through "an ellipsis, rather than a relentless pursuit, of further figuration."[7] If something which is already (literally understood) a consequence is taken up as the ground for troping, then in a significant sense cause and effect have been reversed or at least transumed. For Bloom, this is the basis of a diachronic rhetoric in which modern poetry can be read in terms of the manner in which "conceptual images link themselves in allusive chains …. where the influence process uncannily flows backwards, so that Stevens fathers Whitman, Shelley begets Wordsworth, and Milton converts the Bible into a typological commentary upon *Paradise Lost*."[8] What is crucial to remember, however, is that the uncanniness Bloom refers to is the consequence of a willed poetic *lie against time*. The uncanniness, in other words, is felt by the reader and presumably not the poet, who has, after all, willed this temporal and figurative reversal into being. Transumption, in Bloom's hands, is another word for agon, and it makes no sense without the poetic will, the poetic act of persuasion. Transumption, and its uncanny metaleptic effects, is an intentional act, and what it aims at (defensively, murderously, aggressively) is time and death, where time and death are understood as the primacy of past figurations. As he writes: "Transumption does not murder precursors, but rather drives its projective violence *against time*. Poetic revenge was best defined by Nietzsche, when he wrote of the will's revenge against time, and particularly against time's assertion: 'It was.'"[9]

One might note here the manner in which the possibility of an unwilled return of the dead originally inscribed within the choice of the word *apophrades* is strenuously eradicated in Bloom's opening pages of the chapter of that name in *The Anxiety of*

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7 *The Figure of an Echo*, pp.114, 115.
8 *The Breaking of the Vessels*, p.74.
9 *The Breaking of the Vessels*, p.89.

Influence. We start with poetic lines from Emerson which seem to register a complete lack of control by the living over the return of the dead:

> No anchorage is.
> Sleep is not, death is not;
> Who seem to die live.[10]

We then, very quickly, get the following statement from Bloom himself: "the strong dead return, in poems as in our lives, and they do not come back without darkening the living."[11] This is followed by two citations (spoken by Rousseau) from P. B. Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, which are followed by an interestingly worded, transitional set of statements:

> But the strong poets keep returning from the dead, and only through the quasi-willing mediumship of other strong poets. *How* they return is the decisive matter, for if they return intact, then the return impoverishes the later poets, dooming them to be remembered—if at all—as having ended in poverty, in an imaginative need they could not themselves gratify.[12]

The scene has now been established for the dismal catalogue Bloom will soon offer concerning the manner in which a host of undead precursors came back to visit and overwhelm the late Roethke.[13] But what interests me here is the quick three page passage from an uncalled for and devastating return of the dead to a triumphant image of transumptive power in the strongest of poets around which Bloom will proceed to build his meditation on *apophrades*: "The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own."[14] The reiteration of collective pronouns here is striking and even a little bizarre, given Bloom's characteristic distinction between the few poets

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10 *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.138.
11 *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.139.
12 *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp.140-1.
13 *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.142.
14 *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.141.

and readers who attain "strength" and the rest (of "us"). Here, "we" all seem involved in something of radical importance, a triumph against which is pitted some kind of general annihilation. The triumph of the select few, the "strongest" of poets, concerns us all, and one cannot but help wondering about the precise nature of the danger from which we have apparently all been saved. Bloom's answer would surely be that we have been saved from the obliteration of "strong" poetry. For poetry to persist, for new poets to arrive amongst us, time and death must be reversed. Yet, if *apophrades* involves "our" victory, "our" triumph, one wonders where the uncanniness has gone, given that it seemed to be positioned in the reader's witnessing of agonistic conflict between truly "strong" poets? In Bloom's agonistic reading of the return of the dead there is what we might call an Emersonian either/or: victory or defeat.[15] It is presumably not uncanny to end like poor Roethke, inundated by the strength of unsurpassable precursors. It is presumably not uncanny (to the poet himself) to have the narcissistic, defensive strength of a Milton turning the Bible into a reflector for his own epic text. Bloom's temporary elision of the reader's sense of the uncanny nature of apophrades in the passage I have just quoted is significant, since it suggests a certain anxiety concerning the passivity involved in the original concept of *apophrades* he is employing. Discussing Wallace Stevens's "The Course of a Particular," Bloom refers to "those unlucky days when the dead return, but in colors of the later strong poet's choosing."[16] Yet, if the dead do return "in colors of the later strong poet's choosing," in what sense is the "today" of Stevens's poem, or any successfully transumptive poem, "unlucky"? Bloom's revisionary ratio *apophrades*, like the transumptive theory of diachronic rhetoric he eventually builds out of it, relies itself

15 I am thinking here of Bloom's utilization of Emerson's statements on the crucifixion in his essay "Transumption," in *The Breaking of the Vessels*, p.86.
16 *The Breaking of the Vessels*, p.105.

on an elision of as well as an allusion to past figuration. By which I mean that there is an uncanniness, connected to the arbitrary nature of the dead's return to the houses of the living, which is necessarily repressed by the agonistic scenario and theory within which Bloom would himself house these concepts.

Can a writer him- or herself register the uncanniness of apophrades, the return (of the dead) in the houses of the living? That, in a sense, is my question in this essay. Bloom's agonistics would suggest they cannot, they are either swamped, obliterated, or at least temporally triumphant. The obliteration of identity/voice *qua* poetic will and the triumphant assertion of identity/voice *qua* poetic will, neither of these are positions from which the uncanny can be registered or represented. The Shelleys, I want to suggest, give us a more positive answer to the question I have just posed. There is something uncanny, of course, in my use of the collective "the Shelleys." Despite their ineradicable connection, we have not yet found sufficient ways in which to account for the mutual influence their writings evince. My contention is that one space over which that mutual influence can be registered emerges to view when we begin to take seriously the intense and sustained, if various, engagement in both writers with phenomena we can legitimately nominate as metaleptic. Bloom's apophrades is an extremely useful starting point for such an interpretive adventure, so long as we allow for the possibility of a rethinking of the relationship between precursors, figuration, metalepsis (in the sense of temporal as well as tropological reversals and disturbances), and ultimately life and death. It may well be, to put things succinctly, if elliptically, that there is a kind of writing which bears witness to an uncanny, metaleptic reversal of time, and even (and here is where the uncanny lies) appears to produce it, and yet in which time and death are not

identical to precursors. What happens when we allow for the uncanniness of apophrades in writing, and allow for transumptive, metaleptic echo without immediately circumscribing past figuration within the personified forms of the "illustrious dead"? What if metalepsis, understood both as the primacy of figuration and the reversibility of time, were itself and in itself a force as powerful as the mighty, returning dead, but without their figurable, re-figurable, identifiable face? An example possibly comes at the very beginning of *The Triumph of Life*. We have yet to gain sufficient understanding of the intellectual, writerly relationship between the Shelleys to be able to register how characteristic these lines are of Mary Shelley's work and influence. When we do attain such an understanding, we might be in a better position to read this traditionally enigmatic and undecidable text. It comes as the end of the poem's introductory section makes way for the opening lines of the poem's main vision:

> before me fled
> The night, behind me rose the day; 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 Oceans hold
> Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.
> And then a Vision on my brain was rolled . . .

> As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay
> This was the tenor of my waking dream.[17]

These haunting and haunted lines present us with one of the most important instances of metalepsis in Romantic literature. Most readers coming to the lines would probably not reach for classical rhetorical terms, but would perhaps speak about déjà vu, an experientially affective sense of returning to a place and a time one has never before inhabited or visited. These lines, in other words, concern an experience of returning for the first time, an uncanny break down in the logic of the *turn* and *return*, if you will, which can give *the return* a metaleptic temporal primacy. The experience presented by Shelley's poet is not so much proleptic, as *déjà*, extending the iterability of discourse to the arena of experience or what this poem calls "life." In a poem in which temporality (including chronology) is constantly reversed and reversed again, to the point of catachresis[18], these opening lines seem to confirm Bloom's stress on the importance of figurative reversals of earliness and lateness, and yet to disconfirm his insistence that such metaleptic or transumptive moments must necessarily be involved with a psychological, revisionary and above all tropological agon with a mighty precursor. One could argue, as Bloom well might, that there is a mighty precursor within these lines and that he is the ghost of Wordsworth ("poet of Nature") come back to haunt Shelley one more time. Such an assertion would make, possibly, for a compelling reading, in the hands of a reader like Bloom at least. Shelley's naturalistic imagery of highs and lows, of veils, and glimmering hills and fresh dawns, not to mention singing birds, fountains and

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17 *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1977, p.455-6. Hereafter *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.
18 The best discussion of these terms in the context of Bloom's work remains Peter de Bolla, *Harold Bloom: Towards Diachronic Rhetorics* (London: Routledge, 1988).

capitalised Oceans, provide enough intertextual connections to Wordsworth's poetry to sustain such a reading. That reading, however, would lose much of the uncanniness of the lines in favour of an agon over priority of figuration.

I will return to *The Triumph of Life* later. Here I want to move our focus towards *Adonais*. Bloom, in his final chapter in *The Anxiety of Influence*, calls *Adonais* "sublimely suicidal" and goes on to describe it as "a poem frighteningly transcending mere disinterestedness." Suggesting, in incredibly condensed but provocative form, that in the poem Shelley agonistically revised Keats's Romantic naturalism, Bloom then writes that in this agon we witness "an impatience with the unwilling dross that could check the Spirit's flight," before concluding: "Shelley, in his attitude towards precursors and contemporaries, was by far the most generous strong poet of the post-Enlightenment, but even in him the final phase of the dialectic of misprision had to work itself out."[19]

2. Adonais.

Bloom's depiction of Shelley as the "most generous strong poet of the post-Enlightenment" is a return of the Victorian mythologising of the poet's character which many commentators have argued was inaugurated by Mary Shelley. In her editorial commentary on his works, and in other occasional public and private descriptions of his life and character, Mary Shelley constantly returns to Shelley's sublimely ethical and uniquely generous nature. Her picture of Shelley, and particularly the loss to the world that his death entailed, are often couched, naturally enough, in a language that is clearly influenced by the elegiac voice expressed in *Adonais*. A well-known example comes in her "Preface" to the 1824 *Posthumous Poems*:

19 *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp.151-2.

> The truth was at last known,—a truth that made our loved and lovely Italy appear a tomb, its sky a pall. Every heart echoed the deep lament, and my only consolation was in the praise and earnest love that each voice bestowed and each countenance demonstrated for him we had lost,—not, I fondly hope, for ever: his unearthly and elevated nature is a pledge of the continuation of his being, although in an altered form. Rome received his ashes; they are deposited beneath its weed-grown wall, and "the world's sole monument" is enriched by his remains.[20]

In her "Note On Poems of 1821," in the fourth volume of the 1839 *Poetical Works*, Mary Shelley makes the link explicitly:

> There is much in the Adonais which seems now more applicable to Shelley himself, than to the young and gifted poet whom he mourned. The poetic view he takes of death, and the lofty scorn he displays towards his calumniators, are as a prophecy on his own destiny, when received among immortal names, and the poisonous breath of critics has vanished into emptiness before the fame he inherits.[21]

In her notes to the 1822 poetry, Mary Shelley returns to the prophetic nature of *Adonais* when narrating Shelley's death. She states that "The concluding stanzas of the Adonais pointed out where the remains ought to be deposited; in addition to which our beloved child lay buried in the cemetery at Rome."[22] She then reaffirms, through quotation, her claim for the prophetic nature of Shelley's elegy by stating:

> He selected the spot himself; there is the
> Sepulchre,
> O, not of him, but of our joy!————
> * * * *
> And grey walls moulder round, on which dull Time
> Feeds like slow fire upon a hoary brand;
> And one keen pyramid, with wedge sublime,
> Pavilioning the dust of him who planned
> This refuge for his memory, doth stand
> Like flame transformed to marble; and beneath
> A field is spread, on which a newer band

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20 *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 vols., ed. Nora Crook (with Pamela Clemit), Vol. 2, *Matilda, Dramas, Reviews & Essays, Prefaces & Notes*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996), p.240. Hereafter NSWS Vol.2.
21 NSWS Vol.2, pp.319-20.
22 NSWS Vol.2, p.328.

> Have pitched in Heaven's smile their camp of death,
> Welcoming him we lose with scarce extinguished breath.[23]

What is important to note, within the logic of Mary Shelley's comments, is that the prophetic, metaleptic referent she refers to is not simply the "him" of line 150, but, far more significantly, to Cestius, builder of the "keen pyramid" and subject of the lines about planning one's own resting place within this specific spot just by the ancient walls of Rome. The metaleptic "him" gives us a transfer from Keats to Shelley; the Cestius reference cuts Keats out of the picture and produces what Bloom might call, after Hollander, a transumptive elision of intermediary figuration (i.e. Keats). The scenario seems on one level to fit with Bloom's condensed reading of the poem, since it could be read as an agonistic, transumptive elision rather than celebration of Keats. However, the transumption involved is uncanny, since it only works if the "strong" poet is himself ranked, before the tropological act occurs, within the "mighty dead." The metaleptic reversal of time to which Mary Shelley is alerting Shelley's readers involves a process in which poetic figures trope not prior figures but themselves, or perhaps more accurately transumptively trope their referent by returning to or on themselves. Pushing her argument home, Mary Shelley concludes her notes on the poetry of 1821 by quoting the last stanza of *Adonais*, and in doing so returning us to the power of Shelley's returning (self-transumptive) lines:

> A year before, he had poured into verse all such ideas about death as give it a glory of its own. He had, as it now seems, almost anticipated his own destiny; and when the mind figures his skiff wrapped from sight by the thunder-storm, as it was last seen upon the purple sea; and then, as the cloud of the tempest passed away, no sign remained of where it had been—who but will regard as a prophecy the last stanza of "Adonais?"

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23 Ibid. The quotation is from stanzas 48 and 50 of *Adonais*, ll.424-5, 443-50, see *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp.404-5.

> The breath, whose might I have invoked in song,
> Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
> Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng,
> Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!
> I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
> Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.[24]

The poetry Shelley wrote on the death of Keats contains within it, Mary Shelley argues, an uncanny, prophetic, proleptic, metaleptic potential in which referents shift, in the linguistic sense of that term, in a manner which our normative understanding of time (and within that life and death, reality and textuality) would discount as impossible, illogical, counter to the nature of representation. This is not a new idea to Mary Shelley in 1839. Throughout her letters and her journals we find evidence of an almost immediate sense that Shelley's death was the metaleptic subject of *Adonais*. In her stunning letter to Maria Gisborne of August 15th 1822, so crammed as it is with ghosts, doubles, and uncanny prophecies, she writes: "His rest shall be at Rome beside my child—where one day I also shall join them—Adonais is not Keats's it is his own elegy—he bids you there go to Rome."[25] In another letter written in the same month she states, to the same addressee: "Is not Adonais his own Elegy"[26] before going on to quote a passage from Shelley's poem which would develop intensely personal significance for her: "But I am chained to time & cannot thence depart."[27] In a letter to Jane Williams in February 1823, she refers to stanza 50 as again proleptically guiding whatever choice she will make

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24 *NSWS* Vol.2, p.329.
25 *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 3 Vols., ed. Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), Vol. 1, p.249. Hereafter *LMWS*.
26 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.254.
27 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, pp.254-5.

about her future residence.[28] In a journal entry of June 3rd 1823 she quotes part of that stanza again to the dead Shelley who is in this period frequently the apostrophised addressee of her private writing. The "I" of Shelley's line about being "chained to time", again, not simply metaleptically returning on Shelley but having its shifting referent in Mary Shelley herself. It would seem, in fact, that *Adonais* is not only about Shelley rather than Keats, it is also, at least in moments, at least in part, about Mary Shelley, in the sense of being, transumptively, her elegiac utterance, her melancholy complaint. When the dead return in the lines of *Adonais* they do so, at least as far as this line is concerned, in the colours of Mary Shelley's mourning self.

Mary Shelley was not the only member of her circle to read *Adonais* in the fashion I am describing here. Maria Gisborne, for example, writing to Mary Shelley on October 8th 1822, cannot but reach for *Adonais* as the text which speaks now for her and her friend:

> We seem no longer to have the same object in life that we had before. What can we look forward to with delight, when our friend, our only friend—the divine Shelley—who deigned to have a friendship for us, the sentiment of which embellished our lives, is lost—gone for ever!
>
> "For he is gone, where all things wise and fair
> Descend. Oh, dream not that the amorous deep
> Will yet retrieve him to the vital air;
> Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair."
>
> I was forced to stop to wipe away a flood of tears. I must have some compassion upon my poor dim eyes. But what is our loss to yours? What to the loss of the whole blind human race? But, my dearest Mary, our Shelley is not dead!
>
> "He lives, he wakes—
> He is a portion of the loveliness,
> Which once he made more lovely; he doth bear
> His part—

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28 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.312; see also here her poem "The Choice" in *Mary Shelley's 'Literary Lives' and Other Writings*, gen ed. Nora Crook, 4 Vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002), Vol. 4, *'Life of William Godwin,' Poems, Uncollected Prose, Translations, Part-Authored and Attributed Writings*, eds. A. A. Markley and Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), pp.117-27. See also Graham Allen, "Mary Shelley as Elegaic Poet: The Return and 'The Choice'" in *Romanticism* 13.3, 2007, pp.219-31.

> We dwell upon these thoughts till we cease to care for any thing which this strange incomprehensible world can afford.[29]

Leigh Hunt, in describing Shelley's death, writes that Shelley's remains "will be near Mr Keats in the very spot which he has so beautifully described in his elegy on the death of that poet, observe that elegy now! It reminds every body of Mozart's *Requiem*, & seems to have been written, in a conscious spirit of prophecy, for himself."[30] Hunt goes on to repeat a statement Shelley had made to him that "he had written the Elegy in too melancholy a spirit, but he was strongly affected during the composition with a sense of himself & what he had endured, & that it was more an elegy on himself than the subject of it."[31] Shelley, indeed, had written to Claire Clairmont on June 8th 1821, and had mentioned the composition of his elegy, stating: "it is better than any thing that I have yet written, & worthy both of him & of me."[32] On November 11th 1821, Shelley wrote from Pisa to Charles Ollier: "I am especially curious to hear the fate of Adonais.—I confess I should be surprised if *that* Poem were born to an immortality of oblivion.—"[33]

What Hunt, Maria Gisborne, Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley himself saw in *Adonais* was not simply, I would assert, the common linguistic shifts we associate with the elegy and indeed with public and private forms of mourning. There is an uncanny temporal reversal in the lines of Shelley's poem which allows for the possibility of its being read as a return to Shelley's death before the event of that death. For Mary Shelley, certainly, such a reading seemed possible because within her experience texts do

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29 *Maria Gisborne & Edward Williams. Shelley's Friends: Their Journals and Letters*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), p.90.
30 Leigh Hunt's "Loss of Mr Shelley and Mr Williams" was published with a critical introduction by Timothy Webb as "Religion of the Heart: Leigh Hunt's Tribute to Shelley" in *Keat-Shelley Review*, 7, 1992, pp.1-61 (pp.47-8).
31 Ibid, p.49.
32 *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 Vols, ed. Frederick L. Jones, Vol 2, *Shelley in Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.296. Hereafter, *PBS Letters*.
33 *PBS Letters*, Vol 2, p.365.

frequently precede events, writing does frequently figure experience before the time of that experience has arrived. This is partly the product, as both of the Shelleys undoubtedly knew, of the manner in which key images in their own and their circle's writing constantly return in subsequent writing and in life. We might take the pyramid figure Shelley employs in stanza 50 and which we have seen Mary Shelley returning to as a good example. Having left Rome in June 1819, after the catastrophe of William Shelley's death, Mary entrusted Amelia Curran with the business of arranging a suitable tombstone for her son, buried in the Protestant Cemetery by Cestius's Pyramid. She writes to Amelia Curran from Leghorn on the 18th September:

> Nothing more has been said about the tomb—we still encline to a pyramid as the most durable of simple monumental forms—when you return to Rome do not be angry with me for requesting you to inform yourself of the following particulars—What would be the size of a pyramid built of the most solid materials & covered with white marble at the price of £25 sterl—and also what would be the size of an obelisk built in the same manner & at the same price?[34]

A small marble pyramid beneath the large, ancient pyramid of Cestius; this is the desire of both father and mother for their young son's tomb. Mary Shelley refers to the classical association between pyramids and *durability*; however, one cannot but feel that already, for her, the symbol of the pyramid has taken on a host of associations which already make that monumental form overdetermined. By the time she came to write *The Last Man*, with Shelley along with Byron dead, the figure of the pyramid had taken on such a fundamental symbolism that it could stand, as a complex, polysemic trope, for the entire network of personal, philosophical, political and aesthetic relations set in play within her most encyclopaedic of novels.[35] As the plague reduces the whole of humanity to a circle

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34 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.105.
35 For my reading of *The Last Man* and the figure of the pyramid see *Mary Shelley* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2007).

of only four survivors, Lionel Verney, Adrian Windsor, along with Clara and Evelyn, the only children left on the planet, they bury the last human being to die of the plague under the sea of ice, facing Montanvert, the valley of Arveiron below them. Yet the enduring image, taken from that last goodbye to an entire race, is the pyramidal "vast dome" of Mont Blanc towering over the "tomb of ice" in which the last, "pestilential" human being is buried.[36] The avalanche that engulfs that last of the race is associated by Verney, the last man narrator, with what appears to be the inexorably linear nature of human destiny, or to give it its Godwinian nomination Necessity: "The coming time was as a mighty river, down which a charmed boat is driven, whose mortal steersman knows, that the obvious peril is not the one he needs fear, yet that danger is nigh: and who floats awe-struck under beetling precipices, through the dark and turbid waters—seeing in the distance yet stranger and ruder shapes, towards which he is irresistibly impelled." Verney continues, clearly echoing P. B. Shelley's anti-elegiac conclusion to another poem that haunted Mary Shelley throughout her writing life, *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*:

> What would become of us? O for some Delphic oracle, or Pythian maid, to utter the secrets of futurity! O for some Oedipus to solve the riddle of the cruel Syphnx! Such Oedipus was I to be—not divining a word's juggle, but whose agonizing pangs, and sorrow-tainted life were to be the engines, wherewith to lay bare the secrets of destiny, and reveal the meaning of the enigma, whose explanation closed the history of the human race.[37]

A subtle returning of Shelleyan figures is being staged by Mary Shelley in this important scene. I can here only really gloss what this return of Shelley's poetry involves. The end of *Alastor* means much to Mary Shelley, since within it her husband had expressed the

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36 *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 Vols., ed. Nora Crook (with Pamela Clemit), Vol. 4, *The Last Man*, ed. Jane Blumberg (with Nora Crook) (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996), pp.329, 331. Hereafter *NSWS*, Vol. 4.

37 *NSWS*, Vol. 4, p.330. One could spend a considerable time comparing this scene with the concluding lines from *Alastor* (ll.672-720, for which see *The Poems of Shelley, Volume 1: 1804-1817*, eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Longman, 1989), pp.487-9. Hereafter *Poems of Shelley*.

irremediable tragedy of the death of an individual. The refusal to seek for religious or Enlightenment forms of compensation for loss of the other expressed in those lines is characteristic of Mary Shelley's insistence on the presence of tragedy in human life and human history. Against that, however, the scene from *The Last Man* looks back to Shelley's "Mont Blanc" and encrypts within itself the stunning reversal of that poem's ultimate fifth verse-paragraph, in which the apparently irresistible power of that "dome, pyramid, and pinnacle" is subject to a reversal by "the human mind's imaginings."[38] For Mary Shelley, the figure of the pyramid came to represent the reversibility, the metaleptic, transumptive power of textuality, its ability to repopulate and depopulate, along with its uncanny tendency to *return* upon life, as if life were imitating it rather than it imitating life.

It might be objected that all I have done so far is to demonstrate the manner in which Mary Shelley employs a diachronic chain of tropes concerning pyramids to construct a loving rather than agonistic transumptive return in the pages of her memorial novel, *The Last Man*. There is, however, a level of the uncanny return of the text for Mary Shelley and, I would argue, for P. B. Shelley, which seems more radically predictive, more seriously metaleptic in its reversal of temporal order. *Adonais* contains a number of examples. One rather uncanny example comes in stanza 49 where Shelley refers to the presence of William Shelley in the cemetery which is now receiving the body of Keats:

> Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead
> Thy footsteps to a slope of green access
> Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead,
> A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread.[39]

38 *Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 1, pp.547, 549.
39 *Adonias*, ll. 438-441. Shelley's *Poetry and Prose*, p.404.

Visitors to the Protestant Cemetery in Rome can still visit William's small grave, with the single slab on which his name is inscribed, only a few steps away from Keats's grave in the old grounds of the cemetery. They would be mistaken for thinking that William lies beneath that grave-stone, however. When Shelley died quarantine laws currently in force meant that no new bodies could be buried in the old grounds, close to Cestius's Pyramid. Shelley's body lies in the new grounds of the cemetery, and when workmen were instructed by Trelawny to disinter little William's body, so that it could be placed in the grave with his father's ashes, they found not a child's remains but the skeleton of a full-grown man.[40] William Shelley is, probably, still buried somewhere in the cemetery, and yet the unlocated nature of his presence makes Shelley's lines about how his smile infuses the entire place, like flowers dotted through the grass, uncannily prescient.

Mary Shelley, as we have already seen, found the imagery of the "spirit's bark" "driven/Far from shore," uncannily proleptic of the poet's ultimate end. The passage we have looked at from *The Last Man* moves towards a fictionalised reiteration of that tragedy, as Adrian and Clara (Evelyn having already expired en route) drown in a "little skiff" on the Adriatic (rather than Mediterranean) side of Italy. The whole scene reads like Mary Shelley's attempt to get inside the tragic event of Shelley's, Edward William's and Charles Vivian's drowning, an event from which she was forever excluded.[41] As Adrian and Clara are concocting their disastrous plan to sail from Laguna (near Venice) down past the coastline of the Italian peninsula and then on to Greece, Adrian recites an appropriate poetic text:

> When winds that move not its calm surface, sweep

40 See *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.257.
41 *NSWS*, Vol. 4, pp.341-4.

> The azure sea, I love the land no more;
> The smiles of the serene and tranquil deep
> Tempt my unquiet mind—
> Thus said Adrian, quoting a translation of Moschus's poem, as in the clear morning light, we rowed over the Laguna, past Lido, into the open sea—I would have added in continuation,
> But, when the roar
> Of ocean's gray abyss resounds, and foam
> Gathers upon the sea, and vast waves burst—
> But my friends declared that such verses were evil augury; so in cheerful mood we left the shallow waters, and, when out at sea, unfurled our sails to catch the favourable breeze.[42]

The verses are of course Shelley's, and the fact that although Verney decides against quoting his verses Clara and Adrian still respond to them does not appear to matter much, since we are clearly confronted with a fictionalised version of *the return*, that state in which the normative relationship between event and text is reversed, even to the point of catachresis.

Mary Shelley here stages a fictional scene in which Shelley's past poetry returns upon an event, Shelley's death, which it preceded but which it also proleptically figured. This is the context in which she, and as we have seen she is not alone in this, reads *Adonais*. It is important to add to this expanding diachronic and metaleptic network, in which the poet's death by water is figured and refigured, that as far as Mary Shelley was concerned her own writings significantly contributed to this series of returns. In particular, Mary Shelley, after Shelley's death, looked back at the end she had given to her character Euthanasia in her second novel, *Valperga* (published in 1823, first conceived in 1817, but mainly composed in the years 1820 and 1821)[43], and saw in

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42 *NSWS*, Vol. 4, p.341.
43 See *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 Vols., ed. Nora Crook (with Pamela Clemit), Vol.3, *Valperga: Or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. Nora Crook (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996), p.xi. Hereafter *NSWS*, Vol. 3.

Euthanasia's death at sea a clear proleptic return to the future death of her husband.[44] In a number of the editorial reflections on Shelley's death cited earlier in this essay, it is clearly just as much her own fictional account of the death of Euthanasia than the actual drowning a year later of Shelley that she has in her mind. As Euthanasia is lost at sea, the narrator of *Valperga* writes:

> Earth felt no change when she died; and men forgot her. Yet a lovelier spirit never ceased to breathe, nor was a lovelier form ever destroyed amidst the many it brings forth. Endless tears might well have been shed at her loss; yet for her none wept, save the piteous skies, which deplored the mischief they had themselves committed;—none moaned except the sea-birds that flapped their heavy wings above the ocean-cave wherein she lay;—and the muttering thunder alone tolled her passing bell, as she quitted a life, which for her had been replete with change and sorrow.[45]

The passage is, of course, full of Shelleyan imagery. But what is important here is that after the loss of Shelley, Mary Shelley on a number of occasions refers to the uncanny nature of her heroine's death. In January 1823, for example, she writes to Jane Williams about a dream, which appears to reiterate one Jane has recently reported, in which she spoke to Edward Williams and Shelley. She completes her letter with a post-script, the end of which enquires about Jane's response to her newly published novel: "Is not the end of mine wondrous—the fate—the shore—how miserably foretold—it is very strang[e]".[46] In May of 1823 she writes to Maria Gisborne, again eliciting a reader's response to her new novel, and particularly the end of Euthanasia: "Is not the catastrophe strangely prophetic," before adding: "But it seems to me that in what I have hitherto

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44 Euthanasia is the most ideal female character in all of her fictional works; there is not a little of P. B. Shelley in her Enlightened, republican, benevolent identity. Her name, as various commentators have pointed out, combines a reference to Godwin's vision of a rational and just society born out of "the true euthanasia of government" (see *NSWS*, Vol. 3, p.16) and a reference to Asia in P. B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, see *Valperga*, ed. Tilottama Rajan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1998), p.17. Within this present discussion, however, we could not possibly forget the name's Greek origin: "noble death," "good death."

45 *NSWS*, Vol. 3, p.322.

46 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.307.

written I have done nothing but prophecy what has arrived to. Matilda foretells even many small circumstances most truly—& the whole of it is a monument of what now is—".[47] Shelley's death, Mary Shelley believed, was already figured in *Adonais* and in her novel *Valperga*. The uncanny possibility emerges for readers who pay attention to the metaleptic aspect of this series of returns to that death that in her later editorial comments and memorial returns the referent is not simply the event of Shelley's death, it is also texts, written by P. B. Shelley and by Mary Shelley, before that event occurred.

The passage from *Adonais* Mary Shelley returns to most frequently in the months and indeed years which succeeded Shelley's death comes, as we have seen, in stanza 26 in which Urania mourns the loss of Adonais. The stanza as a whole is not merely a stunning reminder of the uncanny ability of the poem to elegiacally mourn Shelley himself, it also, as Mary Shelley makes plain on a number of occasions, confirms the poem's ability to place her in the position of poetic addresser. The last three lines were particularly important to Mary Shelley, because they captured perfectly her desire not simply to escape from time but, rather, to join in the text's ability to reverse its direction.[48] Readers of Mary Shelley's journal after Shelley's death will also inevitably register how perfectly these lines capture her constant apostrophising of Shelley as her primary addressee:

> Stay, yet awhile! speak to me once again;
> Kiss me, so long but as a kiss may live;
> And in my heartless breast and burning brain
> That word, that kiss shall all thoughts else survive

47 *LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.336.

48 Mary cites the line in her letter to Maria Gisborne of c.27th August 1822, just after she has stated that the poem is Shelley's own elegy (*LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.254) and in another letter, 17th to 20th September 1822, to the same correspondent, she states that she desires the last line to be painted, under images of panseys and shells and the line from *The Tempest* (misquoted as "We will all suffer a sea change"), on a page of velvet (*LMWS*, Vol. 1, p.262). In a journal entry dated June 3rd 1823, she writes: "Meum cordium cor! Good Night!—I am thine for ever & ever—thine only—thine eternally" before quoting the lines one more time.

> With food of saddest memory kept alive,
> Now thou art dead, as if it were a part
> Of thee, my Adonais! I would give
> All that I am to be as thou now art!
> But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart![49]

3. Apophras Hèmera.

The "strangeness" Mary Shelley refers to writing to Jane Williams and Maria Gisborne is evident throughout her letters and her journals. It is also evident in essays such as her "Of Ghosts."[50] In that essay, written in late 1823, Mary Shelley, amidst her light-hearted treatment of the theme, includes a fictionalised account of her experience after the loss of Shelley, only here he is referred to simply as "a friend" and years are added to the scenario in order to distance *the return*[51]:

> Some years ago I lost a friend, and a few months afterwards visited the house where I had last seen him. It was deserted, and though in the midst of a city, its vast halls and spacious apartments occasioned the same sense of loneliness as if it had been situated on an uninhabited heath . . . . I walked through the rooms filled with sensations of the most poignant grief. He had been there; his living frame had been caged by those walls, his breath had mingled with that atmosphere, his step had been on those stones, I thought:—the earth is a tomb, the gaudy sky a vault, we but walking corpses.

The last statement is clearly a covert allusion to *Adonais* as Mary Shelley stages Shelley's uncanny return. But she proceeds:

> The wind rising in the east rushed through the open casements, making them shake;—methought, I heard, I felt—I know not what—but I trembled. To have seen him, but for a moment, I would have knelt until the stones had been worn by the impress, so I told myself, and so I knew a moment after, but then I trembled, awe-struck and fearful. Wherefore? *There is something beyond us of which we are ignorant.* (my emphasis)[52]

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49 *Adonais*, stanza 26, ll.226-34, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p.398.
50 First published in *London Magazine*, IX (March 1824), see *NSWS*, Vol. 2, pp.140-46.
51 It may be that Mary Shelley is purposefully conflating Casa Magni, certainly not "in a city," with one of their previous residences in Pisa. Mary Shelley had moved from Casa Magni back to Pisa in July 1822.
52 *NSWS*, Vol. 2, pp.142-3.

Mary Shelley's essay appears in two recent collections of her work and in neither do the editors feel the necessity to make any comment on this semi-biographical section.[53] The event described might disappoint readers anticipating P. B. Shelley's return to Mary Shelley, and apart from the figuratively loose connection to *Adonais* it might appear as if there was no particular literary intertext involved in the description. However, the uncanny moment in the piece, the moment in fact when the affective phenomenon of the uncanny is expressed, italicised in my citation, is worthy of a footnote. Beatrice, the other major female character in *Valperga*, has a recurrent dream which proves, disastrously for her, to be proleptic, déjà, on two occasions. The second time she attempts to recount her dream, the dream itself has transformed itself into a narrative which in itself looks forward to P. B. Shelley's famous meeting with his own doppelgänger days before his own death.[54] Beatrice explains: "I leaned against the hangings, and there advanced to meet me another form. It was myself; I knew it; it stood before me, melancholy and silent; the very air about it was still. I can tell no more." She finishes by stating: "Yes; there is something mysterious in my nature, which I cannot fathom."[55] The first time Beatrice attempts to describe her proleptic dream her addressee is Euthanasia. Beatrice ends her description of dream becoming reality ("Euthanasia, I came to that scene; if I live, I did! I saw it all as I had before seen it in the slumbers of the night") by stating: "Then something happened, what I cannot tell, terrific it most certainly

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53 Apart from *NSWS*, ibid, the essay also appears in *The Mary Shelley Reader*, eds. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.334-40.
54 For a canonical account, see Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Shelley*, Intro. and Commentary by H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp.404-5. What is interesting in this account is how Medwin explains away Shelley's encounter with his own doppelgänger and his question "Are you content?" with reference to its apparent intertext in Calderon's *El Encapotado* (p.405). That such a reference to text coming before life could simply prove the non-existence of an event is not something, as we have seen, that would make much sense to the Shelleys.
55 *NSWS*, Vol. 3, pp.274-5.

was; Euthanasia, there is something in this strange world, that we none of us understand."[56]

Mary Shelley's articulation of the uncanny return in her essay "On Ghosts" is in itself an example of the uncanny return, since it presents us with another example in which a text refers to life referring to previous texts. The uncanny experience we have been tracing here concerns not so much the return of the dead as *the return*, by which I mean the experience of a metaleptic reversal of the apparently rational order of temporality and thus of representation and signification. When we look for this uncanny return, in which the relation between life and textuality takes on a metaleptic, even catachretic quality, we discover it everywhere in Mary Shelley's fictional and non-fictional work, but it is also there in P. B. Shelley's writing and *The Triumph of Life* may well be his most sustained engagement with it. Can we, however, use Bloom's term *apophrades* to adequately capture what I am simply naming *the return*?

Bloom describes apophrades as "the dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return to inhabit their former houses."[57] Bloom's term, however, is a conflation of two classical notions. *Apophrades hèmeri*, or nefandous days, were days of ill-omen in which, as Lucian explains, "official business is not transacted, introduction of lawsuits is not permissible, sacrifices of victims is not performed, and, in general, nothing is done that requires good omens …."[58] These unlucky days could be connected with days on which battles had been lost and other nefandous events, but they were not directly linked with any notion of the return of the dead. *Apophrades hèmeri* are simply days of ill-omen on

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56 *NSWS*, Vol. 3, p.256.
57 *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.141.
58 Lucian, "The Mistaken Critic, Or a Discourse on the Word Nefandous" in Vol. 5, *Lucian, With an English Translation by A. M. Harmon*, 8 Vols., *The Loeb Classical Library*, ed. T. E. Page, et. al. (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1962), pp.371-415 (p.389).

which usual business is suspended. The idea of specific calendar days on which the dead return to the houses of the living derives from the Athenian and Ionian festival of Anthesteria, a three day festival in February in which the wine laid down the previous autumn was broached in rituals and wine-drinking competitions.[59] As Walter Burkert states: "The festival extends over three days, Jar-opening, Wine Jugs and Pots, *Pithoigia*, *Choes*, and *Chytroi*, named after the simple necessities for wine drinking and a meal of pottage."[60] That it is the Anthesteria festival that Bloom conflates with the *apophras hèmera* is clear from the following quotation from Burkert:

> this day of homely merriment is nonetheless a day of defilement, *miara hemera*. The doors of the houses are freshly painted with pitch, and buckthorn leaves are chewed first thing in the morning to keep away the ghosts. All sanctuaries are closed, roped off, on this 12th Anthesterion[61]: access to the gods is interrupted; business dealings requiring the swearing of oaths are forced to halt as well. The city is peopled instead by uncanny guests, but not even the tradition of antiquity can agree on who or what they are—Carians or Keres, foreigners or destructive spirits, who are later interpreted as souls of the dead. The two accounts converge, however, when the Carians appear in the aetiological legend as former inhabitants of Attica. "Original inhabitants" and "ancestral spirits" are interchangeable terms for those returning spirits who are invited to a meal on a certain day ….[62]

What links the Anthesteria with the notion of nefandous days or *apophrades hèmeri* is not the return of the dead (whoever they are) but in fact the suspension of the quotidian, of the day-to-day order of private and, especially, public life. It is not even clear that we can, with propriety, associate *apophrades hèmeri* with individuals, be they living or dead. Lucian's text is written in order to argue that we can, but the argument is rhetorical, pitted

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59 I am indebted to Professor Keith Sidwell, Head of Classics, University College Cork, for his invaluable guidance on this subject, and I would like to dedicate this essay to my friend and mentor in all things classical.

60 Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.237.

61 Anthesterion refers to the month on which the three-day festival of the Anthesteria takes place and is equivalent, roughly, to our February.

62 Burkert, opp. cit., p.238. Burkert here is describing the second day of the Anthesteria festival, although many scholars would suggest that the day on which the dead return was the third day, *Chytroi*: see, for example, P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir, eds. *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.19-21.

against an interlocutor who has attempted, rather unwisely, to pull Lucian up on what he considers to be something of a mixed metaphor when Lucian had compared him to a nefandous day. Lucian's response to his critic is "strong" in a Bloomian sense of agonistically triumphant, but it does not necessarily prove the semantic point: "they [the Athenians] designate as nefandous a day which is vile, abominable, inauspicious, useless, and like you," Lucian retorts.[63]

There is something missing, something elided, in Bloom's neologism *apophrades*, and it is the uncanny, an affective phenomenon associated not simply and exclusively with the return of the dead but more directly and inclusively with a suspension of the logical (temporal) order. *Apophrades*, if we engage with it as a possible concept and make the attempt to incorporate it into our vocabulary as theorists and critics, might well be said to represent not the agonistics of Bloom's poetics of conflict but, rather, the recognition of recurrent moments of uncanny suspension, reversal and disruption of the logical order. Moments in which the dead may return, but more generally in which we experience the textual and phenomenological force of *the return* in itself. In these moments past texts, life, and the act of writing enter into a process of return which is uncanny in the sense of disrupting our logical understanding of the secondariness of texts in relation to life, of writing in relation to experience. The fact that in suggesting such an understanding I have focused on what Alan Halsey calls *the text of Shelley's death* is a testament to the brilliance and the provocation of Bloom's poetic criticism.[64] What I have been suggesting, however, is that the "dead" that return in the modern version of *apophrades hèmeri* might be what, from a commonplace position, we call *the dead letter*.

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63 Lucian, opp. cit., p.387.
64 Alan Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death* (Sheffield; West House Books, 2001).

Writing is more alive and on occasions more primary than the received wisdom of modern, mimetic culture suggests. It can even turn out, in certain circumstances, such as those experienced by Mary Shelley, before and after P. B. Shelley's death, that the uncanny *return* I am associating with Bloom's *apophrades* is a wholly welcome and positive event. For some, the suspension of normal business, of the familiar succession of day for day, and text for event, is an occasion that cannot come often enough: as if the "re" in *return* were purely tropological, purely just another in a series of turns, and the uncanny nature of the constantly rotating "re" were what one desired and wanted to call "home."