CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Mary Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne
Authors	Allen, Graham
Publication date	2009-06-01
Original Citation	Allen, Graham; (2009) 'Mary Shelley's Letter to Maria Gisborne'. La Questione Romantica, 1 (1):71-84.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.liguori.it/periodici.asp?isbn=4890_71-84.pdf
Rights	© Liguori Editore, 2009 - by Graham Allen, Mary Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne in La Questione Romantica, 1 (1):69-82. ISBN 978-88-207-4829-6
Download date	2026-11-07 23:10:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1209



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Mary Shelley's Letter to Maria Gisborne

Abstract: This paper focuses on Mary Shelley's letter to her friend Maria Gisborne. In this letter Mary Shelley describes the last days of her husband P. B. Shelley and does so in ways which emphasise a certain set of gothic and uncanny events. The paper argues that such uncanny events are part of both writers concern with metalepsis, a figure which involves or at least invokes the reversal of time and space. The paper formed part of a special memorial edition of *La Questione Romantica,* which honoured the life and work of the editor of Mary Shelley's letters, Professor Betty T. Bennett.

*

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

*

We will all suffer a sea change[i]

Betty T. Bennett has permanently altered our sense of Mary Shelley as a writer and an intellectual. Her work is of the same order of importance as Northrop Frye's on William Blake, Geoffrey H. Hartman's on Wordsworth, Jerome J. McGann's on Byron. After Bennett's numerous essays, books and above all her monumental edition of the letters, it is impossible (or should be) to perpetuate the Victorian myth of Mary Shelley as a woman whose meaningful writing career ended with the death of P. B. Shelley. Bennett

made this point on a number of occasions, including the first paragraph of her introduction to the letters, where she points to the 'selective approaches' which

> have produced biographical studies that fail to probe deeply into the details and complexities of Mary Shelley's personality and behaviour and, aside from commentary on *Frankenstein* (1818), have largely deflected critical inquiry away from Mary Shelley as a creator and creation of the romantic period. (L, I, xi)

When reflecting on the obstacles in the way of an adequate understanding of Mary Shelley, Bennett was eminently clear on the issue of what she called 'the biographical hurdle.'[ii] Readers of Mary Shelley face what can appear to be a paradox: recognizing the constraining and confining role that biographical approaches have had in the critical reception of Shelley's work, it is still necessary to return to her biography in order to correct and revise the misconceptions that have piled up over the years. As Bennett puts it:

> it is a commonplace for biographers, essayists, and editors who study female authors to 'explain' their subjects through the circumstances of the author's husband, children, parents, and friends, while virtually ignoring the author's work in terms of intellectual and artistic achievement—the primary reasons to study the author in the first place.[iii]

What I have called 'biographism' cannot be overcome by avoiding the biography of writers and all the documents (letters, notes, journals) which are associated with it.[iv] The 'biographical hurdle' is not the reference to biography itself, but rather the use to which materials traditionally associated with biography are employed. Biographism is not defined as reading the author's life, it concerns a privileging of 'life' over and at the

expense of 'work' and 'text.' As Bennett wrote: 'the letters tell Mary Shelley's story in her own voices, her own commerce with the world. From them, a new complex, intellectual, political Mary Shelley has emerged—one that had been there all along.'[v] To utilize the resources Bennett's scholarship has provided us with, we need to stop reading Mary Shelley's letters as data and begin to engage with them as texts. The letters, along with her journal writing, begin then to present us with a host of connections with her novels and other published works, connections which demonstrate a remarkable, complex and multiple 'voice.' The need to read Mary Shelley's letters as texts is increased by the fact that for both Shelleys the relationship between life and text was not simple, transparent, or even chrono-logical. The presence, for example, of the experience of déjà vu in P. B. Shelley's work takes us from his fragment 'Catalogue of the Phenomena of Dreams' (possibly written as early as 1815), which Mary Shelley appended to the 'Speculations on Metaphysics' in her 1839 edition of the *Essays*, through to the opening of his last, unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*.[vi] P. B. Shelley's description of the reversal of the logical order of life and dream in that former text may well have influenced Beatrice's proleptic dream in Mary Shelley's *Valperga*. The 'waking dream' which opens *The Triumph of Life* is certainly a return on P. B. Shelley's part to the dream recounted in the 'Catalogue,' a text in which he asks the metaphysical and, for him, serious question: 'What is the connection between sleeping and waking?'[vii] That Mary Shelley took such questions and disturbances of the chronological order seriously is evidenced not only by the presence of such events and questions in her own fictional work, but also from her statements regarding P. B. Shelley's unfinished metaphysical speculations:

> Had not Shelley deserted metaphysics for poetry in his youth, and had he not been lost to us early, so that all his vaster projects were wrecked with him in the waves, he would have presented the world with a complete theory of mind; a theory to which Berkeley, Coleridge, and Kant, would have contributed; but more simple, unimpugnable, and entire, than the systems of these writers.[viii]

Reading Mary Shelley's letters as texts is crucial in our attempt to return to the voice or voices of Mary Shelley. For Bennett what this meant was, primarily, a reassertion of Mary Shelley's lifelong commitment to reformist politics. What I would add here is that part of that return must include Mary Shelley's own sense of what, after her own work, I have called *the return*.[ix] Indeed, this theme, shared by the Shelleys, in which the possibility of life returning to text, of text being originary in relation to life, is only perceived, let alone understood, when we begin to treat all of the Shelleys' work (published and unpublished) as texts. I do not mean in this essay to explain such a complex element of both Shelleys' work. This essay is intended to demonstrate its presence within Mary Shelley's letters and to make some suggestions as to its potential challenge to our understanding of Mary Shelley's and P. B. Shelley's biographies. My example is perhaps the most famous letter Mary Shelley ever wrote, her letter to Maria Gisborne, dated August 15, 1822, a month after P. B. Shelley's death.[x]

Mary Shelley starts the letter by discussing her miscarriage of June 16 and her slow convalescence in the weeks that followed. She writes: 'They all thought & so did I at one time that I was about to die …. My convalescence was slow and during it a strange occurrence happened to retard it.' (L, I, p.244) Having alluded to this 'strange occurrence,' she delays its telling by going off on a description of Casa Magni, including

a hand-drawn and numbered diagram of the rooms, before, now ready to proceed with her story, she prefaces it by writing: 'Now to return.' (L, I, p.245) The 'strange occurrence' concerns a night of horrors and visions on the part of P. B. Shelley, 'as bad,' writes Mary, 'as in his worst times.' The event is one that has been narrated numerous times in biographies of the poet. On this night Shelley had woken the entire household with 'a return of his nervous sensations and visions' and his screams (L, I, 245). Shelley had come rushing into Mary's room: 'I was sure that he was asleep & tried to waken him by calling on him, but he continued to scream which inspired me with such a panic that I jumped out of bed & ran across the hall to Mrs W's [Jane Williams's] room.' Shelley in the mean time had woken up (was he ever asleep?), on account of Mary jumping out of bed, and she proceeded to question him, particularly concerning whether he had in fact been asleep. Mary writes: 'he said that he had not been asleep & that it was a vision that he saw that had frightened him.' But she remains unconvinced: '… it was certainly a dream and no waking vision,' she states.

Trelawny seems to have had similar problems with this event. He gives his own version of the series of events, including Mary Shelley fainting against the Williams' door and thus waking them, while Shelley follows her. To this account of Shelley the 'sleep-walker' Trelawny adds: 'The Poet often got up at night to write or read, and talked in sleep, but he was no somnambulist.'[xi] Later on Trelawny was to write that the 'habit of taking laudanum accounts for all his visions and occasional delusions, but [that they still] startled his wife and friends …' (*Records*, p.189) Medwin, in his *The Life of Percy Shelley*, quotes a more credulous Byron:

> Byron, the most superstitious of human beings, related the following story, which I afterwards heard confirmed by Mrs. Williams. 'Shelley, soon after he arrived at Casa Magni, one night alarmed all the house with loud and piercing cries. The Williams's rushed out of their rooms, and Mrs. Shelley, who had miscarried a few days before, got at the same time as far as the door, and fainted. They found Shelley in the saloon, with his eyes wide open, and gazing on vacuity, with a horror as though he saw some spectre. He was in a deep trance, a sort of somnambulism. On waking him, he related to them that he had had a vision. He thought that a figure wrapped in a mantle, came to his bedside, and beckoned him. He got up, and followed, and when in the drawing-room, the phantom lifted up the hood of his cloak, and said, "*Siete soddisfatte*,' and vanished.[xii]

We might notice how the event has changed considerably, the characters involved performing different actions, half of the event disappearing, and in fact various events being condensed into one. We might also notice that it is not clear whether Shelley's doppelgänger spoke English, Italian, or, like Shelley himself, both. We might also notice that the word 'vision' is not necessarily equivalent to the word 'dream,' creating therefore an ambiguity (about somnambulism) in an account apparently aimed at eliminating ambiguity. Medwin himself gives another kind of explanation for this event, a literary, intertextual one:

> He had been reading a strange drama, attributed to Calderon, entitled the [sic] *El Encapotado*. It is so rare, that Washington Irving told me he had hunted for it, but without success, in several of the public libraries of Spain. The story is, that a sort of Cypriano, or Faust, is through life thwarted in his plans for the acquisition of

wealth or honour or happiness, by a mysterious stranger, who stands in his way like some evil spirit. The hero is at length in love—we know it is the master-passion in Spaniards. The day is fixed for his nuptials, when the unknown contrives to sow dissension between him and his bride elect, and to break off the match. Infuriate with his wrongs, he breathes nothing but revenge; but for a time all attempts to hunt out his mantled foe prove abortive; at length he presents himself of his own accord. When about to fight, the *embocado* unmasks, and discovers the fetch of himself—his *double*, saying 'Are you satisfied?' The catastrophe is the death of the victim from horror. (Medwin, p.405)[xiii]

What Mary Shelley does next is to narrate what Shelley had dreamt or seen in a vision, a waking dream:

What had frightened him was this—He dreamt that lying as he did in bed Edward & Jane came into him, they were in the most horrible condition, their bodies lacerated—their bones starting through their skin, the faces pale yet stained with blood, they could hardly walk, but Edward was the weakest & Jane was supporting him—Edward said—get up, Shelley, the sea is flooding the house & it is all coming down.' S. got up, he thought, & went to the his (sic) window that looked on the terrace & the sea & thought he saw the sea rushing in. Suddenly his vision changed & he saw <& thought he saw I> the figure of himself strangling me, that had made him rush into my room, yet fearful of frightening me he dared not approach the bed, when my jumping out awoke him, or as he phrased it caused his vision to vanish. All this was frightening enough, & talking it over the next morning he told me that he had had many visions lately—he had seen the

> figure of himself which met him as he walked on the terrace & said to him—'How long do you mean to be content'—No very terrific words and certainly not prophetic of what has occurred. But Shelley had often seen these figures when ill . . . . (L, I, p. 245)

Richard Holmes, in an interestingly divided manner, describes Shelley's meeting with his double: 'It was of course his Zoroastrian double,' but he then goes on, 'he had at last succeeded in thoroughly terrifying Mary.'[xiv] Does that last statement mean that Shelley was awake during this event? or is it a statement about Shelley's unconscious desires? Similar ambiguities arise in Miranda Seymour's account. She writes: 'It was during this period that Shelley's feelings towards her showed themselves *most clearly*, in the form of dreams.'[xv]

Kenneth Neill Cameron goes even further in 'explaining' this event. He quotes from Edward Williams's journal: '*Sunday, June 23*. Calm—Painting and fitting rigging. During the night S sees *spirits* and alarms the whole house.' Cameron asserts:

> Williams apparently did not regard the episode as seriously as did Mary and ironically hints that Shelley was conscious of his actions. Whether or not this was true, the content of the nightmare, as given by Mary, reveals Shelley's state of mind at the time. Laceration, strangulation, death, the whelming of the sea—these are typically expressive of fear and hostility. It is interesting, too, that Mary was the one being strangled, and that Jane appeared as stronger than Edward ("who was the weakest").[xvi]

It is also interesting, I would add, that Cameron's account of what this event *reveals* begins with Williams's account but then silently shifts to Mary Shelley's account *as if* the

very thing he begins by marking out, the narrator's style of narration, were transparent, ultimately lacking any real mediatory effect in terms of the event narrated. That such shifts of perspective can be significant is wonderfully born out in Cameron's next paragraph, in which he seems to forget completely that he is dealing with a frame-narrative structure which takes us from Jane and Trelawny to Mary Shelley on to Maria Gisborne. Forgetting that context here, Cameron gives us a moment of sheer fantasy, in which Shelley suddenly gains control not only over the gaze of the other but, incredibly, his own psychic double and in which fantasy (i.e. Jane's) is transformed into historical fact (Shelley, according to Cameron, *was* actually on the verandah!):

> In the 'doppelgänger' episode, in which Shelley 'met' his own figure on the terrace, he must again have been experiencing one of his heightened-imagination fantasies. In the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* he had written that Zoroaster 'met his own image walking in the garden.' And Mary reports him saying that he had 'often seen these figures when ill,' presumably when he had a fever. Shelley obviously felt attracted by the doppelgänger fantasy, perhaps morbidly so, for the doppelgänger was supposed to be a premonition of death. (Cameron, p.94)

Returning to Mary Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne, we come to the events which Cameron is blending into the night-time scene of horrors. Mary writes: 'but the strangest thing is that Mrs W. saw him'. Saw whom? She explains that Jane, standing with Trelawny, had seen P. B. Shelley pass by on the terrace and then repeat the action:

> now as he passed both times the same way—and as from the side towards which he went each time there was no way to get back except past the window again (except over a wall twenty feet from the ground) she was struck at seeing him

> pass twice thus & looked out & seeing him no more she said—'Good God can Shelley have leapt from the wall? Where can he be gone?' Shelley, said Trelawny—'No Shelley has past—What do you mean?' Trelawny says that she trembled exceedingly when she heard this & it proved indeed that Shelley had never been on the terrace & was far off at the time she saw him. Well we thought [no] more of these things & I slowly got better. (L, I, 244)

Holmes states that Shelley's death is 'one of the most powerful of all Romantic legends. And also one of the most misleading.' He adds that it (Shelley's death) 'transformed his life almost beyond recovery.'[xvii] Recovery, I presume, would involve the successful separation of textual information into the opposed categories of fiction and fact, a separation or ordering which includes the re-establishment of temporal order, the successful explanation (biographically, historically, culturally, psychoanalytically) of phantasmal effects such as déjà vu, doppelgangers, proleptic visions, proleptic texts, *the return*. I cannot join with Holmes in his use of the word 'almost.' But then I cannot join him in his sense of chronology, i.e. the death of P. B. Shelley being the origin of misunderstanding, confusion, strangeness. Nor, for that matter, despite the beautiful way in which Alan Halsey has formed the 'texts' (here quotations mainly) into a strange non- or a-fictional poem, can I agree with his assertion that:

> In Mary's mind
>
> The idealization of Shelley begins almost at once.[xviii]

It is that 'almost at once' which Holmes and Halsey and many others seem to share that is troubling when we return to Mary Shelley's letters in general, and the text of Shelley's

death in particular. Here, for example, is a section from a letter sent by Mary Shelley to Thomas Medwin on July 29, 1822:

> Except that his health was getting better & better I wd not selfishly desire that his angelic spirit shd again inhabit that frame which tormented it—he is alive & often with me now—Every one feels the same, all say that he was an elemental spirit imprisoned here but free & happy now (L, I, p.243)

When does this kind of figuring of Shelley by '[e]very one' begin? and when does it 'almost' begin to begin? In the famous Fournier painting Mary Shelley is there, modestly kneeling; and yet of course she was not present at Shelley's cremation. Holmes writes: 'in fact she was never there at all' ('Shelley Undrowned,' p.2). She was, certainly, on the day of the cremation, back at Pisa writing her letter to Maria Gisborne. She writes: 'Today—this day—the sun shining in the sky—they are gone to the desolate sea coast to perform the last offices. Hunt, LB. & Trelawny …. I have seen the spot where he now lies—the sticks that mark the spot where the sands cover him—he shall not be there it is too nea[r] Via Reggio—They are now about this fearful office—& I live!' (L, I, p.249). Mary is wrong, however, because on this day, 15 August, Edward Williams' body parts were cremated and it was not until the following day that Shelley's cremation took place.[xix] Nothing is precisely or simply, or singularly, what it appears to be in this story. This series of events seems to resist hardening into facts. Everything shifts or becomes subject to an uncanny process of shifting, from linguistic pronouns, to dates, names, painted figures, inconsumable hearts and ludicrously designed boats. For example, returning to where we left the letter to Maria Gisborne, Mary explains how full of foreboding she was when Shelley and Edward had left to meet the Hunts. Her foreboding

concerns not P. B. Shelley but their sole remaining child. She recounts how in letters to Shelley she had described being 'haunted' with 'the feeling of some misfortunate.' She adds: 'I feared for the child, for the idea of danger connected with him never struck me.' (L, I, p.246) She goes on: 'I repeated to myself all that another would have said to console me, & told myself the tale of love peace & competence which I enjoyed—but I answered myself by tears—did not my William die? & did I hold my Percy by a firmer tenure?' (ibid) The answer is, of course, yes and no, since there are two Percys; or rather, since Percy is a double, a haunted name, a shifter, as, indeed, we should add, are the names William, Mary, and Shelley.

Mary Shelley continues, describing the terrible wait for news as the days slowly passed after Monday, July 8, the day on which Shelley and Williams were due to sail back and the day of the violent storm. Friday was letter day, but what arrived was not a reassuring letter from Shelley or Williams but an equally anxious letter from Leigh Hunt: 'pray write to tell us how you got home, for they say that you had bad weather after you sailed Monday & we are anxious.' (L, I, p.247) What is dreadful in this scene is not simply the news that they had indeed sailed on that stormy Monday; it is, equally, or even more so, the written address to P. B. Shelley. Hunt addresses Shelley in a letter that arrives at its destination (Casa Magni) but which can never arrive at its destination. To employ a word from Derrida's book on postcards, the letter's destinerrance or destinerrancy is appalling.[xx] How do you address someone who no longer exists? How do you speak or write to someone who cannot receive your address? It is something—writing to Shelley, speaking to Shelley—that Mary was increasingly going to do over the next months and years. Her journals are a fascinating testament to the role of the shifter

in the work of mourning: in particular the manner in which the name Shelley constantly shifts its referent from a dead person to the direct, present object of address.

On reading Hunt's letter, Jane and Mary rushed by post southwards towards Pisa, and this is where Mary writes of them: 'It must have been fearful to see us—two poor, wild, aghast creatures—driving (like Matilda) towards the sea to learn if we were to be forever doomed to misery.' (L, I, p.247) Like *Valperga*, her earlier novella *Matilda* now becomes a prophetic work and we should note that the character of Mathilda is one which can be described as a shifter. Mathilda is someone who cannot ever achieve a stable selfhood. She is figured as someone else by her father and her Shelleyan-like potential lover, after the father's suicide. Mathilda collapses by the text's end into her own and other people's figurations; an experience which makes life for her a permanent waking dream or paramnesis, a state of being nothing but an intertextual, wandering figure, or shifter.[xxi] In another letter to Maria Gisborne, dated 3 (5) May, 1823, Mary once again reverts to the proleptic quality of *Mathilda* and *Valperga*:

> Did the End of Beatrice surprise you …. 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— (*L*, I, 336)

Jane and Mary go to Byron's Pisan residence, Casa Lanfranchi, where the Hunts are guests. Byron had related to his publisher John Murray that Casa Lanfranchi was 'so full of Ghosts that the learned Fletcher (my Valet) has begged leave to change his room—and then refused to occupy his new room—because there were more Ghosts there than in the other.'[xxii] P. B. Shelley had said that 'the entrance hall "seemed built for

ghosts"'.[xxiii] Fiona MacCarthy describes the house, including the presence of Morretto, Byron's bulldog, who was 'kept chained outside the door on the first-floor landing to discourage unwanted visitors' (MacCarthy, p.406). One feels tempted to enquire whether these unwanted visitors were assumed to be earthly or supernatural. Mary Shelley adds to our sense of the scene. She and Jane did not arrive until midnight, when she writes: 'I settled that we should drive to Case Lanfranchi that I should get out & ask the fearful question of Hunt, "do you know any thing of Shelley?"' (L, I, p.247) What a 'fearful' question: 'Sapete alcuna cosa di Shelley'? The question is an abyss. Anyone could fall into it and never come out. This is a question that, as Mary Shelley frames it in her mind, is preparing to contribute greatly to the literary history of England and Europe. But it is not to Leigh Hunt she gets to ask her ghostly question; he and his family had long retired to bed. Byron was actually in residence and Mary writes of the scene:

> They knew nothing—he had left Pisa on Sunday—on Monday he had sailed—there had been bad weather Monday afternoon—more they knew not. Both LB & the Lady have told me since—that on that terrific evening I looked more like a ghost than a woman—light seemed to emanate from my features, my face was very white. I looked like marble— (ibid).

Jane and Mary did not stay with Byron, Teresa Guiccioli, Moretto and the slumbering Hunts, however, and it was after two when they reached the hotel in the centre of Pisa where the following morning they will have to ask these terrible questions to Captain Roberts. Everything points to tragedy; everything points to the fulfilment of the prophecy contained at the end of *Valperga* and throughout *Mathilda*. They returned, after having spoken with Roberts, accompanied by Trelawny, to Lerici.

Mary Shelley's long letter to Maria Gisborne ends with yet another visionary anticipation of Shelley's death. This time the dreamer is Mrs Mason, who told Mary that she had met Shelley on the Monday, the day he, Williams and Vivian had sailed, and that night had had two dreams about Shelley. In the second dream Shelley was dead, and she had said to Mary that she had awoken 'crying bitterly …. & felt so miserable—that she said to herself—"Why if the little boy should die I should not feel it in this manner." She [was] so struck with these dreams that she mentioned them to her servants the next day—saying she hoped all was well with us.' (L, I, p.250) Before narrating this, however, Mary has made one other statement about the manner in which literary texts or dreams seem to anticipate the event of Shelley's death. In the middle of a passage on seeing the beach at Viareggio, Mary 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.—' (L, I, p.249) Frequently, in the following months and years, Mary Shelley reverted back to this idea about *Adonais*. In another letter to Maria Gisborne, just twelve days after the one we have been looking at, Mary writes:

> The world will surely one day feel what it has lost when this bright child of song deserted her—Is not Adonais his own Elegy—& there does he truly depict the universal woe wh[ich] should overspread all good minds since he has ceased to be [their] fellow labourer in this worldly scene. How lovely does he [ ] paint death to be and with what heartfelt sorrow does one repeat that line—'But I am chained to time & cannot thence depart.' (L, I, pp.254-5)

In 1839, when she was writing the Preface to Shelley's *Poetical Works*, she still held this metaleptic, prophetic view of Shelley's great elegy for Keats, writing in conclusion:

> A year before [his death], he had poured into verse all such ideas about death as give it a glory of its own. He had, as it now seems, 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 stanzas of 'Adonais'
>
> > The breath, whose might I have invoked in song,
> > Descends on me; my spirits' bark is driven,
> > Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng,
> > Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
> > The mossy 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. (Mary Shelley, *Works*, vol. 2, p.329)

If we read *Adonais* as Shelley's own elegy, a poem mourning Shelley's own death, as Mary Shelley clearly did, then we also have to countenance the possibility that at moments the poem's addresser is Mary Shelley.[xxiv] It is that idea, I would suggest, that uncanny, shifting effect, that she is referring to in the letter to Maria Gisborne, and I add the line and a-half before the line she quotes: 'I would give/ All that I am to be as thou now art!/ But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart!' Can we imagine a reading of *Adonais* which gives us, at least in places, Mary Shelley as its speaker, its mourning

voice? Can we imagine such a 'sea change'? Strange as it is, I am suggesting not only that we can but that we must.

When biographers and historians and historically-oriented critics try to 'recover' the lives of such authors as P. B. Shelley and Mary Shelley, they often forget that the object of their narratives were textual creatures from the very beginning; subjects, that is, already divided by the word and by textuality. I am not suggesting for one moment that we can actually see the events around Shelley's death from Mary Shelley's point of view. I am saying, however, that there is a point of convergence between her texts and the reading I am describing here. For me, P. B. Shelley is always already dead, drowned in the Bay of Spezia, before he is born, or writes *Queen Mab*, or marries Harriet Westbrook, or visits Dublin, or runs away to Europe with Mary and Jane/Claire, or writes *Adonais* or *The Triumph of Life*. The idea of *Adonais* or the end of *Alastor* or *The Triumph of Life* being his own elegy is merely symptomatic of my own or anyone else's necessarily metaleptic or transumptive reading of his life and work (using those terms with one eye on the work of Harold Bloom and John Hollander).[xxv] Everything he ever wrote or did, on this level, can be read as elegiac, as returning to his death, and to pretend otherwise and to assert that our responsibility is solely to try to straighten out or 'recover' his life and work into a chronological narrative is to sever historical work, biographical or critical, from its own foundation (its origin) in writing. For Mary Shelley, of course, these patterns and echoes, and strange disturbances of the rational temporal order, looked like events of prophecy, prolepsis, divination, déjà vu, haunting and, we might add, what Derrida calls *the work of mourning*.[xxvi] They made life and writing metaleptic or transumptive (they disturbed, that is, the logical temporal order, the chrono-logical order

of signification and figuration) and they made life subject to a perpetual shifting and return. In their textual form these patterns can be understood in terms of the *iterable*, *iterability*, to employ Derrida's concept, the singular, unique experience of repetition; an experience which feels like paramnesia, being beside memory, déjà vu.[xxvii] I return to my epigram and the accuracy of the misquotation; the 'sea-change' being that iterable force which makes everything double, déjà, which for all of us, or at least all of us who would learn to read, presents us with the singular, diachronic force of *the return*.[xxviii]

i. Betty T. Bennett, ed. *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. 3 Vols. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980-8. Vol. 1, p.262. Hereafter L.
ii. Betty T. Bennett, 'Feminism and Editing Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: The Editor And?/Or? the Text' in *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities*. Eds. George Bornstein and Ralph G. Williams. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp.67-96 (p.87).
iii. Bennett, 'Feminism and Editing', p.87.
iv. 'Beyond Biographism: Mary Shelley's *Matilda*, Intertextuality and the Wandering Subject,' *Romanticism*, 3.2, 1997, pp.170-84.
v. Betty T. Bennett, 'Finding Mary Shelley in Her Letters' in *Romantic Revisions*. Ed. Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.291-306 (p.292).
vi. For the text of the 'Catalogue' see David Lee Clark, ed. *Shelley's Prose*. London: Fourth Estate, 1988, pp.193-4.
vii. David Lee Clark, ed. *Shelley's Prose*, p.193.
viii. Mary Shelley, 'Preface' to *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in *the Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*. 8 Vols. Gen. Ed. Nora Crook. Vol. 2, *Matilda, Dramas, Reviews and Essays, Prefaces and Notes*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996, p.338.
ix. Graham Allen, 'Mary Shelley as Elegaic Poet: The Return and "The Choice"' in *Romanticism*, 13.3, 2007, pp.219-32. See also Graham Allen, *Mary Shelley*. London: Palgrave, 2008.
x. For recent discussions of Shelley's sense of *the return* see, Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Screen-Memories and Fictionalized Autobiography: Mary Shelley's *Matilda* and "The Mourner"' in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 27:4, 2005, pp.365-81 and Lauren Gillingham, 'Romancing Experience: The Seduction of Mary Shelley's *Matilda*' in *Studies in Romanticism*, 42.2, 2003, pp.251-65.
xi. Edward John Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*. Ed. David Wright. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p.146.
xii. Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Shelley*. Intro. and Commentary by H. Buxton Forman. London: Oxford University Press, 1913, pp.404-5.
xiii. The uncanniness can only be increased when we think of the similarities between this apparent intertext and Mary Shelley's own short story 'Transformation' along with Byron's *The Deformed Transformed*.
xiv. Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p.727.
xv. Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley*. London: John Murray, 2000, p.300.
xvi. Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Gold Years*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974, p. 94. Hereafter, Cameron. See also, Maria Gisborne and Edward E. Williams, *Shelley's Friends: Their Journals and Letters*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951, p.155.
xvii. Richard Holmes, 'Shelley Undrowned' in *Interrupted Lives*. Ed. Andrew Motion. London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004, pp.22-35 (p.23).
xviii. Alan Halsey, *The Text of Shelley's Death*. Sheffield: West House Books, 2001, p.63.

xix. Mary Shelley corrects her dating in her next letter to Maria Gisborne, c. 27th August 1822 (L, I, p.253).
xx Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987).
xxi. See Graham Allen, "Beyond Biographism: Mary Shelley's *Matilda*, Intertextuality and the Wandering Subject," *Romanticism*, 3.2, 1997, pp.170-84.
xxii. Cited in Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, London: John Murray, 2002, p.406.
xxiii. Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, London: John Murray, 2002, p.406.
xxiv. See also L, I, p.283.
xxv. See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 and *The Breaking of the Vessels*, Chicago and London: Chicago U. P., 1982; John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981.
xxvi Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
xxvii. For *iterability* see Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*. Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
xxviii. The line is a misquotation from Shakespeare, Ariel's song from *The Tempest*, taken from a letter by Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, dated September 20, 1822 (L, I, p.262). Mary Shelley, in this letter, requested Maria Gisborne to get for her two pieces of velvet and have the design of a 'pansey' painted on one and the design of a shell 'of the kind of S's arms,' 'the copy of a large & beautiful Indian shell' with the text from *The Tempest* written over the top. Importantly, in this letter, dealing with the material objects associated with mourning, Mary Shelley also goes on to ask that underneath the painting of the shell—'in a straight line under'—there be written the lines from Shelley's *Adonais*: 'But I am chained to time & cannot thence depart.' (L, I, p.262). In another letter to Maria Gisborne, dated November 22, 1822, Mary, without a copy of Shakespeare to hand, attempts to correct this misquotation from *The Tempest* only to produce a new misquotation: 'There is nothing in us but must suffer a sea change' (L, I, p.292). She eventually writes the quotation accurately in a letter to Maria Gisborne on May 3 (6), 1823, where she also describes the origins of the misquotations in Trelawny's 'high spirits' in early 1822 on arriving at Casa Magni with 'news concerning the building of the boat.' Mary Shelley quotes him as exclaiming 'oh—we must all embark—all live aboard—"We will all suffer a sea-change," and dearest Shelley was delighted with the quotation—saying that he wd have it for the motto of his boat.' (L, I, p.334) Mary Shelley, here, states: 'This quotation by its double meaning alludes both to the manner of his d–h & his genius.' (L, I, p.334) She means, by the latter, that there was something in Shelley that was in 'sympathy' with water 'which [element] may still retain him in some other shape' (L, I, p.334). See also L, I, p.337.