

Dante's Linguistic Detail in Shelley's Triumph of Life

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**Anita O'Connell,**

**"Dante's Linguistic Detail in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Dante's Linguistic Detail in Shelley's *Triumph of Life*" Anita O'Connell analyzes Shelley's attention to detail in Dante's poetic style and presents a close textual analysis of the ways Shelley draws on the beauty of Dante's texts. When Dante's *Divine Comedy* re-emerged into the public sphere in Britain through Henry Cary's 1814 translation, his reputation was as a stern, dark, Medieval poet and readers and writers alike shared a love of the perceived gothicism particularly of *The Inferno*. Shelley, however, differed from this general view of Dante: despite the grotesque descriptions in his *Triumph of Life*, Shelley draws most upon the delicate beauty and attention to detail he finds in Dante's texts.

**Anita O'CONNELL**

### **Dante's Linguistic Detail in Shelley's *Triumph of Life***

In the Romantic period Dante's reputation was often as a weighty poet with a stern, dark, Medieval style. Many readers and critics, such as Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Hunt, saw him as both obscure and masculine. *The Inferno* was his most popular work in the early part of the century, and his reputation in the general public often stemmed from its Gothicism. Shelley, however, read Dante differently. He was inspired by a delicate beauty, an attention to detail, and a femininity he found throughout *The Divine Comedy*, as well as in Dante's other works. Although he was to some extent drawn to the darker aspects of Dante, unlike many of his contemporaries Shelley did not focus primarily on these; rather, he read around the heavy masculinity to discover delicacy in the detail.

In *Italy and the English Romantics*, C.P. Brand shows that despite a few translations of *The Divine Comedy*, "as late as the end of the eighteenth-century ... Dante admirers were few. When he was known at all, he was generally condemned for his 'absurdities and horrors' and his 'harsh and unpolished' style" (54). Brand argues that Romantic poets felt a kinship with Dante and changed this view entirely. They did, certainly. But even in the new century it does take awhile for Dante to shed the reputation of a "harsh and unpolished style." While Romantic writers appreciate and admire Dante, many still do see him as having a dark imagination and heavy, "unpolished" style of verse. It is more the fact that the gothic revival helps them to appreciate those qualities. With great admiration for the elder poet, Coleridge nevertheless refers to "the gloomy Imagination of Dante" (*The Watchman* 25 March 1796; Braida 71) and Byron, who was clearly very influenced by Dante in several poems, calls him "obscure" - an adjective that occurs in early nineteenth-century Dante criticism again and again. He is said to be "intense" (Hunt 4 38), to have "a certain primeval intensity" (Hunt 4 70), and to be "over-serious" (Hunt 4 12) with a "stern style" (Coleridge, *Lectures* 2 401).

In such criticism, writers seem to have the Dante of *The Inferno* in mind. *The Inferno* was inspirational in Romantic art as well as literature and certainly captured the gothic imagination in the early part of the nineteenth century. It had entered the public consciousness as one of the ultimate expressions of the grotesque. In an essay about a fight, quite unrelated to Dante, Hazlitt describes one of the opponents as "like a preternatural, spectral appearance, or like one of the figures of Dante's *Inferno*" (Hazlitt 9 70), while Hunt compares a dream in *The Faerie Queene* to "a frightful, hideous dream, from the Italian [poet]" (Hunt 4 51). Such awe of the dark, masculine Gothicism of *The Inferno* is one of the prevailing features of Dante for these critics when they discuss Dante in more general terms. In one of Hazlitt's 1818 lectures, he writes extensively on Dante, focusing primarily on the dark, gloomy, weightiness of his works. Describing his poetry as "the first great step from Gothic darkness and barbarism" (Hazlitt 2 179), but not showing it to be a terribly great step at all, Hazlitt writes that

Dante seems to have been indebted to the Bible for the gloomy tone of his mind, as well as for the prophetic fury which exalts and kindles his poetry ... His genius is not a sparkling flame, but the sullen heat of a furnace. ... There is a gloomy abstraction in / his conceptions, which lies like a dead weight upon the mind; a benumbing stupor, a breathless awe, from the intensity of the impression, a terrible obscurity like that which oppresses us in dreams ... He takes advantage even of the nakedness and dreary vacuity of his subject. His imagination peoples the shades of death, and broods over the silent air. He is the severest of all writers, the most hard and impenetrable, the most opposite to the flowery and glittering ... His poetry accordingly gives the same thrilling and overwhelming sensation, which is caught by gazing on the face of a person who has seen some object of horror (2 179-80).

For Hazlitt, Dante is the "severest" and "hardest" of writers, while his poetry is gloomy, intense and obscure. His ideas lie "like a dead weight" and there are "shades of death" in his imagery. While the passage as a whole is intended to be appreciative and complimentary to Dante, it is clear that Hazlitt's overall impression is of a dark and masculine poet - gothic in the true, Medieval sense of the word.

While these sources do not provide a full or rounded perspective of how Dante was perceived in the Romantic period, they do help to demonstrate a popular current of thought and certain generalizations of Dante in literary criticism at the time Shelley was writing. As Stephen Hebron says, "Time and again, Dante's apparent want of manners, his harshness and vulgarity, is explained and excused by

the barbaric tastes and cruel prejudices of his age" (9). It was quite common to see Dante as part of a dark Medievalism and his writing style as strong, heavy and stripped of delicate detail. In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley was, to some extent, inspired by the darker aspects of *The Inferno* and by this reputation. His grotesque description of the triumph is indeed, as he says, "a wonder worthy of [Dante's] rhyme" (*Percy Bysshe Shelley* 471; all subsequent quotations from *The Triumph of Life* are from this edition). However, Shelley differs from this general view in also seeing a delicate beauty in Dante's detail. Many enjoyed the love story of Paolo and Francesca; Shelley took this further seeing such beauty throughout *The Divine Comedy*, as well as in Dante's other works.

Dante was frequently aligned with Michelangelo in the Romantic period, the strong, masculine lines of the artist equated with the poet's style of verse and imagery. Coleridge is among those who publicly aligned the two in his lectures (Coleridge, *Lectures* 2 333). In some of Shelley's letters he vehemently disagrees with this parallel. Lamenting the lack of "loveliness" in Michelangelo's work, Shelley writes to Hunt saying that "he has been called the *Dante* of painting; but if we find some of the gross and strong outlines which are employed in the few most distasteful passages of the 'Inferno,' where shall we find *your* Francesca, where the Spirit coming over the sea in a boat, like Mars rising from the vapours of the horizon, where Matilda gathering flowers, and all the exquisite tenderness, and sensibility, and ideal beauty, in which *Dante* excelled all other poets except *Shakspeare*?" (Shelley, Letter to Hunt 3 September 1819, *The Complete Works* 10 77). Although Shelley admits to seeing some of the strong weightiness of the poet, he nevertheless views Dante more as a poet of delicate detail, someone whose defining feature is his "loveliness." It is not simply that Dante has a few beautiful passages; for Shelley he "excelled all other poets except *Shakspeare*" in his "exquisite tenderness," his "sensibility" and his "ideal beauty." The description is in stark contrast to Hazlitt's comment that Dante is "the most opposite to the flowery and glittering" (2 179).

In *The Triumph of Life* it is exactly the "flowery and glittering" that Shelley most draws upon from Dante, in particular from *The Purgatorio*. The similarities in their poetry come most from the delicate and detailed imagery and language. Timothy Webb has argued that Shelley attempted to strip bare his descriptions to emulate Dante's "simplicity of diction" (324; 327-29). Yet in fact it is often the descriptors – the adjectives themselves – that echo Dante, even despite the language difference. Shelley repeatedly borrows descriptive words from Dante, such as trembling (*tremolante*), sweet (*dolce*) and splendour (*splendore*), the latter of which John Taafe noted as Dantean in his 1822 annotated copy of *Adonais* (Fogle 39; Vassalo 108). When Shelley writes about the "splendours" of the sunrise (2-3), of the chariot (86-87), and of the shape all light (359), the "splendour [that] drops / From Lucifer," the morning star (413-14) and the "tempest of the splendour" that "flew" before Iris the rainbow's "arch of victory" (439-44), he echoes Dante's descriptions of the "splendours" (*splendori*) of the dawn (27 109) and of an angel at sunset (15 1-24) in Purgatory, while his "stems of the sweet flowers" (317), "sweet talk in music" (39) and "sweet notes that move / The sphere" (478-79) are similar to Dante's description of music as sung "so sweetly that the sweetness sounds within me still" (38) ("dolcemente, / che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi sona" [2 113-14]) and the Te Deums heard "in voices mingled with the sweet sound" (125) ("in voce mista al dolce suono" [*Divine Comedy* 9 141; all quotations of Dante are from this edition unless indicated otherwise; the edition is bilingual with Italian and English side by side; English citations refer to the page numbers; Italian citations refer to canto and line]). Yet the similarity of the two poets' descriptions is not only in the use of certain, perhaps not uncommon, words; the delicacy that both convey through them is what makes them stand out. The words one finds noticeably repeated are descriptors of beauty and, often, fragility. Dante frequently uses the word *tremolante* (trembling), which conveys an instability, a fear and a tender nature. He not only writes of "the trembling of the sea" (25) ("il tremolar della marina" [1 117]), which does not seem an unusual description of the waves, but he also writes of "the trembling air" (*Inferno* 67) ("nell'aura che trema" [*Inferno* 4 150]) and of an angel with a face that "seemed like a trembling star at dawn" (159) ("quale / par tremolando mattutina stella" [12 89-90]). Dante's delicacy comes through in Shelley's description of the young moon whose "white shell trembles amid crimson air" (81), her vulnerability and tenderness both conveyed by the trembling. The description is likewise echoed in Shelley's lines on flowers "which uncloset / Their trembling eyelids to the kiss of day" (9-10). The fragility of the flowers as they open their petals in the early morning sun is conveyed specifically through the use of Dante's word "trembling." Shelley may limit the number of descriptive adjectives

he uses in *The Triumph of Life* to model Dante's "simplicity of diction" (Webb 324), but he certainly does not dispense of them and neither did his predecessor. On the contrary, some of the nearest echoes are in those very descriptors.

It is not only certain repeated adjectives in which Dante's and Shelley's descriptions are alike. It is also in what Hazlitt calls the "flowery" — in the beauty of the details, particularly of nature and, indeed, often of flowers. The frailty of the flowers "which uncloset / Their trembling eyelids to the kiss of day" (*Percy Bysshe Shelley* 9-10) is also seen in Shelley's description of Rousseau as like "a shut lily stricken by the wand / Of dewy morning's vital alchemy" (401-02). Both have the delicate detail of Dante in *The Inferno* when he says, "As little flowers, bent down and closed with the chill of night, when sun brightens them stand all open on their stems, such I became with my failing strength" (*Inferno* 41) ("Quali i fioretti, dal notturno gelo / chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca / si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo, / tal mi fec' io di mia virtute stanca" [*Inferno* 2 127-30]). Both Shelley and Dante convey a sense of weakness and frailty overcome by gathering strength through a comparison with the tenderness of little flowers in the cold bravely opening their petals and standing erect as the sun warms them. These examples are all simply passing details, part of the richness of the tapestry, but not central to the context of either poem. In appreciating what Shelley called "loveliness" in Dante's nature, it is very often in the finer details.

The main passage of Shelley's *Triumph* that clearly draws on *The Purgatorio* — as many critics have noted — is that of Matilda in the Earthly Paradise. As Timothy Webb points out, Shelley's choice of this passage as one he translated extensively seems unusual because "One might have expected him to respond delightedly to the Gothic horrors of the *Inferno*, but ... he obviously preferred the gentler aspects of Dante" (317). Despite the Gothicism of parts of *The Triumph*, it is not in these that Shelley most draws on Dante, but rather in the beauty of the valley of perpetual dream. Much of the action, imagery and language in the two scenes is remarkably similar, as Shelley echoes, yet changes and rewrites, his predecessor. While Matilda appears by a Lethean river in a dark place with "perpetual shade which never lets sun or moon shine there" (367) ("l'ombra perpetua, che mai / raggiar non lascia sole ivi nè luna" [28 32-33]), in the shadow of a mountain, Shelley's enigmatic "shape all light" (352) appears in a "deep cavern" (361), with "gliding waves and shadows dun" (342) and walks on, as Matilda walks beside, a Lethean stream. Both rivers are compared with mirrors, and Shelley's stream, "a gentle rivulet / Whose water like clean air in its calm sweep // 'Bent the soft grass and kept forever wet / The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove / With sounds which all who heard must needs forget // 'All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love, / Which they had known before that hour of rest" (314-20), closely resembles Dante's "stream which with its little waves bent leftwards the grass that sprang on its bank. All the waters that are purest here would seem to have some defilement in them beside that ... With feet I stopped and with eyes passed over beyond the streamlet to look at the great variety of fresh-flowering boughs, and there appeared to me there, as appears of a sudden a thing that for wonder drives away every other thought, a lady all alone, who went singing and culling flower from flower with which all her way was painted" (365-67) ("rio, / che 'nver sinistra con sue picciole onde / piegava l'erba che 'n sua ripa uscìo. / Tutte l'acque che son di qua più monde / parrieno avere in sè mistura alcuna / verso di quella, che nulla nasconde / ... / Coi piè ristetti e con li occhi passai / di là dal fiumicello, per mirare / la gran variazion di freschi mai; / e là m'apparve, sì com'elli appare / subitamente cosa che disvia / per meraviglia tutto altro pensare, / una donna soletta che si già / cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore / ond'era pinta tutta la sua via" [28 25-30; 34-42]). Even the grass on the banks of the Lethean streams is bent in the same way in these passages as the water flows over it. Shelley translated these lines on the lady as "even like a thing / Which suddenly for blank astonishment / Dissolves all other thought" (Shelley qtd. in Webb 314), which is echoed in Shelley's shape all light and the ceaseless song as "still her feet, no less than the sweet tune / To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot / The thoughts of him who gazed on them" (382-84). It is Matilda who causes forgetfulness in the passage quoted, but, as in *The Triumph*, Dante's stream is Lethe, which, as "it flows down with virtue ... takes from men the memory of sin" (371) ("con virtù discende / che toglie altrui memoria del peccato" [28 127-28]). Matilda is herself shrouded in light and "love's beams" (367) ("raggi d'amore" [28 43]), just as Shelley's woman is a "shape all light" (352) who has a "fierce splendour" (351) and "stood // 'Amid the Sun, as he amid the blaze / Of his own glory" (348-50). As Matilda sings and gathers flowers she is also said to turn "As a lady turns

in the dance with feet close together on the ground and hardly puts one foot before the other" (367) ("Come si volge con le piante strette / a terre ed intra sè donna che balli, / e piede innanzi piede a pena mette" [28 52-54]), which Shelley echoes in the shape all light's gentle dance-like movements upon the stream where her feet are said to be "so tender / Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow" (361-62) and "Partly to tread the waves with feet which kissed / The dancing foam, partly to glide along / the airs that roughen the moist amethyst" (370-71). Shelley is clearly very influenced by the passage on Matilda and echoes it in the detail, such as the way the water laps over the grass, in the content of a captivating lady by a Lethean stream and grove of sounds, and even in the language itself with repetition of Dante's words such as *temperara* (tempered), *dolce* (sweet) and *suono* (sounds).

Hazlitt's charge, that Dante is "the most opposite to the flowery and glittering" (2 179) is countered by Shelley not only in his interest in Dante's detailed descriptions of nature, particularly of flowers and meadows, but also in, as Hazlitt says, the "glittering." The light, which is one of the most notable features of *The Triumph*, is also partially inspired by Dante. Shelley's descriptions of the sun and stars have a similar emphasis on the beauty and radiance of the light, while his shapes have the "excess" of light that Dante gives his angels.

Just as *The Triumph* opens with a description of the dawn where "the Sun sprang forth / Rejoicing in his splendour, and the mask // Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth. / The smokeless altars of the mountain snows / Flamed above crimson clouds ... at the birth // Of light" (2-7), so too does *The Purgatorio*, as Dante says, "The sweet hue of the oriental sapphire which was gathering in the serene face of the heavens from the clear zenith to the first circle gladdened my eyes ... I saw four stars ... the sky seemed to rejoice in their flames" (19) ("Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro, / che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto / del mezzo puro insino al primo giro, / alli occhi miei ricominciò diletto / ... vidi quattro stelle / ... / Goder pareva il ciel di lor fiammelle" [1 13-16, 23, 25]). Both openings show dawn extinguishing the night and the light of the sun (in Shelley) and the stars (in Dante) "rejoicing" and lighting up their surroundings with "flames." Yet Dante's description of the brightening sky as "oriental sapphire" is also similar to Shelley's description of the light in the cavern in the valley of perpetual dream, where he writes, "the bright omnipresence / Of morning through the orient cavern flowed, / And the Sun's image radiantly intense / 'Burned on the waters of the well that glowed / Like gold, and threaded all the forest maze / With winding paths of emerald fire" (343-48). The word "orient" seems an unusual description for the light, yet it suggests both the sunrise in the east and a beautiful, almost exotic, presence of light. Both poets are able to capture the colors and the glory of the dawn. Shelley's passage on the sun in the cave with the shape all light flinging "Dew on the earth" (353), as well as the sun replacing the mask of darkness, recall Dante's description of the sun in Purgatory when, having reached "its highest point, and night circling opposite to it, was issuing from the Ganges with the Scales, which fall from her hand when she exceeds the day, so that, there where I was, the white and rosy cheeks of fair Aurora, with her increasing age, were turning orange" (33) ("suo più alto punto; / e la notte, che opposita a lui cerchia, / uscìa di Gange fuor con le Bilance, / che le caggion di man quando soverchia; / sì che le bianche e le vermiglie guance, / là dov' i' era, della bella Aurora / per troppa etate divenivan rance" [2 3-9]). Shelley draws on Dante's descriptions of the sun and stars in detail, here from the way darkness and dew fall from a woman's hands to the sometimes scientific, sometimes mythological, yet always colorful and radiant, descriptions of light.

These examples are, again, simply passing details, the poetry that creates the atmosphere and setting. Shelley draws even more noticeably on Dante's many descriptions of angels and their "excess" of light for his main figures — the radiant "shapes." In *The Triumph* the stars, the sun, the shape in the triumphal chariot and the shape all light are continually in competition as each brighter light extinguishes the one before it with its brilliance. When the shape all light appears, she is likened to the day as it obscures the light of the stars: "As Day upon the threshold of the east / Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath // 'Of darkness re-illuminates even the least / Of heaven's living eyes — like day she came, / Making the night a dream" (389-93). The shape all light brightens the cavern, extinguishing the darkness, just as the sun lights up the sky after night. When she fades, it is in the brighter light of the chariot and its shape, which have "a cold glare, intenser than the noon / But icy cold, [which] obscured with ... light / The Sun as he the stars" (77-79). This time as the softer light, the shape all light is compared to the stars in the light of the sun, as Shelley says, "And the fair shape

waned in the coming light / As veil by veil the silent splendour drops / From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite // 'Of sunrise" (412-15). As she moves, unseen, "in that [other] light's severe excess" (424), she is likewise compared to "A light from Heaven whose half-extinguished beam // 'Through the sick day [...]/ Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost. —" (429-31) Although the poem does have its shadows and darkness, often it radiates with light imagery as each light is only obscured by a brighter one.

Dante also describes lights extinguishing one another, at times the sun outshining the stars, though it is more often the angels and other figures who, like Shelley's shapes, radiate or reflect light. At the beginning of *The Purgatorio* when Cato appears, Dante says, "the rays of the four holy stars so adorned his face with light that I saw him as if the sun were before him" (21) ("Li raggi delle quattro luci sante / fregiavan sì la sua faccia di lume, / ch' i' 'l vedea come 'l sol fosse davante" [1 37-39]). Like Shelley, Dante compares the light of the stars to that of the sun in order to convey the brilliance of Cato as the light shines on him. When Shelley describes the chariot as "that light's severe excess" (424), his use of the word "severe" is specific to *The Triumph*, but the rest of the phrase does draw on Dante's frequent use of the "excess" of light. When, at sunset, Dante says "the beams were striking us full in the face" (196) ("i raggi ne ferien per mezzo 'l naso" [15 7]), he adds, "I felt my brow weighed down by the splendour far more than before and the causes being unknown left me dazed. I raised my hand, therefore, above my eyebrows and made for myself the shade that tempers excess of light" (197) ("quand' io senti' a me gravar la fronte / allo splendore assai più che di prima, / e stupor m'eran le cose non conte; / ond' io levai le mani inver la cima / delle mie ciglia, e fecimi 'l solecchio / che del soverchio visibile lima") (15 10-15). Throughout *The Triumph* light is continually "tempered" by another "excess" of light. Dante likewise describes "the sun, which weighs down our sight and veils its form by excess" (223) ("al sol che nostra vista grava / e per soverchio sua figura vela" [17 52-53]), just as he describes the angels with green wings by saying "I plainly discerned their flaxen hair, but in their faces my eyes were dazzled, as a faculty is confounded by excess" (109) ("Ben discerneva in lor la testa bionda; / ma nella faccia l'occhio si smarria, / come virtù ch'a troppo si confonda" [8 34-36]). Far from the dark Gothicism, it is this dazzling light, the "glittering," as Hazlitt would say, that Shelley draws upon most in his poem.

Shelley's enigmatic shape all light is quite unique and is given a calm, yet somehow also severe, spellbinding charm that only Shelley could. However she does seem, to some extent, to be inspired by Dante's spirits and lights of heaven. In *The Purgatorio* Dante tells of "a divine spirit who ... hides himself in his own light" (223) ("è divino spirito, che ... / col suo lume sè medesimo cela" [17 55, 57]) while in *The Paradiso* he describes figures as bathed in their own light, one of which reads: "I see well how thou nestest in thine own light, and that thou drawest it from thine eyes, since it sparkles whenever thou smilest; but I know not who thou art, nor why, good spirit, thou hast rank in the sphere that is veiled to mortals in another's beams.' I said this, directing myself to the radiance that had first spoken to me, and it then became far brighter than before. Like the sun, which itself conceals itself by excess of light when the heat has gnawed away the dense tempering vapours, so with increase of happiness the holy form hid itself from me within its own beams and thus all enclosed answered me" (*Paradiso* 81) ("Io veggio ben sì come tu t'annidi / nel proprio lume, e che delli occhi il traggi, / perch'e' corusca sì come tu ridi; / ma non so chi tu se', nè perchè aggi, / anima degna, il grado della spera / che si vela a' mortai con altrui raggi.' / Questo diss' io diritto alla lumera / che pria m'avea parlato; ond'ella fessi / lucente più assai di quel ch'ell'era. / Sì come il sol che si cela elli stessi / per troppa luce, come 'l caldo ha rose / le temperanze di vapori spessi; / per più letizia sì mi si nascose / dentro al suo raggio la figura santa; / e così chiusa chiusa mi rispose" [*Paradiso* 5 124-38]). Like the shape all light, this "radiance" is also nestled and hidden in its own light, yet nevertheless retains some human features since Dante perceives it smile just as Shelley describes the shape's movements. It is compared with the sun and its "excess of light," just as is Shelley's shape, its sphere is "veiled to mortals," much like Shelley's "realm without a name" (396) from where the shape all light seems to come, and the appearance of the radiance sparks questions in Dante just as the shape does in the character of Rousseau. Shelley's passage is central to *The Triumph* and as one of his most powerful and beautiful pieces of writing it goes beyond this less significant description of a figure in *The Paradiso*. Nevertheless it shows how the two poets are similar in their descriptions of light and how Shelley is inspired by the "glittering" in Dante.

Perhaps one of the most interesting linguistic parallels between the poets is in the way Shelley adopts what I will call Dante's "reversed similes." Dante often uses similes by beginning with the comparison, the vehicle, before telling the reader what the literal subject, or tenor, is. The simile "My love is like a red, red rose" in *The Divine Comedy* would be written "Like a red, red rose, so is my love." Dante's reversed similes are usually much longer, though, and have the effect of creating a whole atmosphere or scene before revealing the subject he is describing. One of the many examples of this in *The Purgatorio* is when he describes his eagerness by comparing it with that of a baby bird: "And as the little stork lifts its wing with desire to fly and does not venture to leave the nest and drops it again, such was I with the desire to question kindled and quenched, going as far as the movement of one that prepares to speak" (325) ("E quale il cicognin che leva l'ala / per voglia di volare, e non s'attenta / d'abbandonar lo nido, e giù la cala; / tal era io con voglia accesa e spenta / di dimandar, venendo infino all'atto / che fa colui ch'a dicer s'argomenta" [25 10-15]). Dante here describes the baby stork in great detail, creating a vivid image of its eager curiosity and youthful fear and weakness, before explaining that the comparison is with himself. Shelley picks up on Dante's reversed similes and uses the technique several times in *The Triumph*. In one example he describes the figurative moon at length before revealing that it is the chariot he is literally describing: "Like the young moon / When on the sunlit limits of the night / Her white shell trembles amid crimson air, / And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might // Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear / The ghost of her dead mother, whose dim form / Bends in the dark ether from her infant's chair, // So came a chariot on the silent storm / Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape / So sate within as one whom years deform" (79-88). The young, bright, yet trembling moon holding the dim ghost of her dead mother bent over in her chair is such a descriptive image that a scene as well as a mood is created in the reader's mind long before the description of the bright chariot and its shadowy, seemingly elderly Shape are introduced. Shelley is a close reader of Dante to pick up on the effect of reversing and extending his comparisons.

Some of the reversed similes in Dante are very similar to Shelley's style in *The Triumph* and show the delicacy that Shelley saw in Dante's details. His similes of nature and light are particularly Shelleyan, as when he writes, "And as the breeze of May, herald of the dawn, stirs and gives fragrance, being all impregnate with the grass and flowers, such a wind I felt strike full on my brow and I plainly felt the moving of his wing, which made me feel the odour of ambrosia" (315-17) ("E quale, annunziatrice delli albori, / l'aura di maggio movesi ed olezza, / tutta impregnata dall'erba e da' fiori; / tal mi senti' un vento dar per mezza / la fronte, e ben senti' mover la piuma, / che fè sentir d'ambrosia l'orezza" [24 145-50]). Shelley likewise evokes the light fragrant spring breeze and the dawn in his poem, and would have appreciated the beauty of the images as well as its diction with words like "ambrosia." This example is not unlike Shelley's reversed simile when he says, "'As one enamoured is upborne in dream / O'er lily-paven lakes mid silver mist / To wondrous music, so this shape might seem // 'Partly to tread the waves with feet which kissed / The dancing foam, partly to glide along / The airs that roughen the moist amethyst, // 'Or the slant morning beams that fell among / The trees, or the soft shadows of the trees" (367-74). Shelley may use more adjectives in his description, but it nevertheless evokes a similar mood, as well as a delicacy through its nature imagery and its language.

Many of Dante's reversed similes do have that delicacy that so effected Shelley, and must have helped influence him to adopt the technique. It could easily be part of *The Triumph* when Dante says, "and as the air, when it is full of rain, becomes adorned with various colours through another's beams that are reflected in it, so the neighbouring air sets itself into that form which the soul that stopped there stamps upon it by its power, and then, like the flame that follows the fire wherever it shifts, its new form follows the spirit" (329) ("e come l'aere, quand'è ben pïorno, / per l'altrui raggio che 'n sè si riflette, / di diversi color diventa adorno; / così l'aere vicin quivi si mette / in quella forma che in lui suggella / virtüalmente l'alma che ristette; / e simigliante poi alla fiammella / che segue il foco là 'vunque si muta, segue lo spirto sua forma novella" [25 91-99]). Dante could almost be speaking of the shape all light flinging dew from her hands with Iris, the rainbow, spread before her and trampling Rousseau's thoughts into dust. And indeed Shelley uses several reversed similes to describe the movements of the shape all light, from the "one enamoured [who] is upborne in dream" (367) to a comparison with the sunrise that "Treads out the lamps of night" (390) and from the new vision burst-



ing on Rousseau's sight like waves erasing the footsteps of deer and wolves (405-11) to the extended reversed simile,

And as the presence of that fairest planet,  
Although unseen, is felt by one who hopes

'That his day's path may end as he began it  
In that star's smile, whose light is like the scent  
Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,

'Or the soft note in which his dear lament  
The Brescian shepherd breathes, or the caress  
That turned his weary slumber to content –

'So knew I in that light's severe excess  
The presence of that shape which on the stream  
Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,

'More dimly than a day-appearing dream

...

Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost. — (416-31)

Shelley uses such extended reversed similes in order to describe the undescribable, as Dante did with his angels and eternal landscapes. He draws on the "loveliness" and delicacy of Dante's language and imagery particularly in his passages on the valley of perpetual dream and the shape all light to create its beautiful and radiant atmosphere.

Shelley is, to an extent, also inspired by the darker aspects of *The Inferno*. Dante refers to Hell as "the abysmal valley of pain" (*Inferno* 59) ("della valle d'abisso dolorosa" [*Inferno* 4 8]) and "the valley of Hell" (*Purgatorio* 21) ("la valle inferna" [*Purgatorio* 1 45]), which does seem to suggest Shelley's "oblivious valley" (539) in which the triumph appears, as well as "the valley of perpetual dream" (397). Perhaps more poignantly Dante's storms in Hell are quite similar to the tempest of Shelley's triumph, one being described as "The hellish storm, never resting, [which] seizes and drives spirits before it; smiting and whirling them about, it torments them" (*Inferno* 75) ("La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, / mena li spirti con la sua rapina: / voltando e percotendo li molesta" [*Inferno* 5 31-33]). It is not unlike Shelley's triumphal car being drawn through "thick lightnings" (96), which, "where'er // The chariot rolled a captive multitude / Was driven" (118-20) who are "tortured by the agonizing pleasure, / Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun / Of that fierce spirit" (143-45). Nevertheless, Shelley goes much farther than Dante in his grotesque imagery and descriptions with very few being at all similar to the imagery of *The Inferno*.

When, in a review of Shelley's poetry, Hunt compares Shelley's style to that of Dante, it is the dark, masculine, gothic poet of *The Inferno* he sees in Shelley's work. He writes of Shelley that "it is his gloomier or more imaginative passages that sometimes remind us of Dante. The sort of supernatural architecture in which he delights has in particular the grandeur as well as obscurity of that great genius" (2 159). Although Shelley might at times reflect the gloomy imagination of *The Inferno*, in fact far more often it is the "loveliness" and beauty of Dante's details in which Shelley delights. Shelley saw in Dante something few other Romantic readers did. He was not merely a dark, gothic poet to Shelley, as he was to some. As late as 1838 and despite Shelley's earlier letters to him on the beauty of Dante's verse, Hunt, like many others, would still see Dante's *Divine Comedy* as, in his words, having "a good deal of Hell, not only in its Purgatory, but in its very Heaven" (Hunt 3 358-59). He joins Hazlitt in observing "the fact of his having put several of his 'friends into hell!'" and concludes that "Dante is, in truth, a man of so discordant a sort of greatness, that he can only be accounted for on the supposition of his being the offspring of two persons of diametrically opposed natures, — a fierce, saturnine father, for instance, and a gentle mother. Unfortunately the complexion of the father prevailed" (Hunt 3 358-59). Shelley would have disagreed. He saw both sides in Dante as well, but for him, the "gentler" aspects were at least as prominent. In another letter complaining that Michelangelo had "no sense of beauty," Shelley argues, "what is terror without a contrast with, and a connexion with, loveliness? How

well Dante understood this secret" (Letter to Peacock 25 February 1819, *The Complete Works* 10 32). For Shelley, Dante is not obscure and weighty; rather, he is a poet of "exquisite tenderness, and sensibility, and ideal beauty" (*The Complete Works* 10 77). Shelley draws most upon the very aspects that others missed in Dante — the "flowery and glittering" (Hazlitt 2 179), the lovely and the radiant. He reads around the masculine to discover a poet whose attention to detail, imagery, and descriptions were gentle and beautiful.

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