

The Triumph of Life

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1824

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory and of good, 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, and at the birth
Of light, the Ocean's orison arose,
To which the birds tempered their matin lay.
All flowers in field or forest which uncloze
Their trembling eyelids to the kiss of day,
Swinging their censers in the element,
With orient incense lit by the new ray
Burned slow and inconsumably, and sent
Their odorous sighs up to the smiling air;
And, in succession due, did continent,
Isle, ocean, and all things that in them wear
The form and character of mortal mould,
Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear
Their portion of the toil, which he of old
Took as his own, and then imposed on them:
But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold
Had kept as wakeful as the stars that gem
The cone of night, now they were laid asleep
Stretched my faint limbs beneath the hoary stem
Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep
Of a green Apennine: 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
Bathe in the same cold dew my brow and hair,
And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn
Under the self-same bough, and heard as there
The birds, the fountains and the ocean hold
Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air,
And then a vision on my train was rolled.

...

As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay,
This was the tenour of my waking dream:—
Methought I sate beside a public way
Thick strewn with summer dust, and a great stream
Of people there was hurrying to and fro,
Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,
All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
He made one of the multitude, and so
Was borne amid the crowd, as through the sky
One of the million leaves of summer's bier;
Old age and youth, manhood and infancy,
Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,
Some flying from the thing they feared, and some
Seeking the object of another's fear;
And others, as with steps towards the tomb,
Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,
And others mournfully within the gloom
Of their own shadow walked, and called it death;
And some fled from it as it were a ghost,
Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath:
But more, with motions which each other crossed,
Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw,
Or birds within the noonday aether lost,
Upon that path where flowers never grew,—
And, weary with vain toil and faint for thirst,
Heard not the fountains, whose melodious dew
Out of their mossy cells forever burst;
Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told
Of grassy paths and wood-lawns interspersed
With overarching elms and caverns cold,
And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they
Pursued their serious folly as of old.

And as I gazed, methought that in the way
 The throng grew wilder, as the woods of June
 When the south wind shakes the extinguished day,
 And a cold glare, intenser than the noon,
 But icy cold, obscured with blinding light
 The sun, as he the stars. 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 the herald of its coming, bear
 The ghost of its dead mother, whose dim form
 Bends in dark aether 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,
 Beneath a dusky hood and double cape,
 Crouching within the shadow of a tomb;
 And o'er what seemed the head a cloud-like crape
 Was bent, a dun and faint aethereal gloom
 Tempering the light. Upon the chariot-beam
 A Janus-visaged Shadow did assume
 The guidance of that wonder-winged team;
 The shapes which drew it in thick lightnings
 Were lost:—I heard alone on the air's soft stream
 The music of their ever-moving wings.
 All the four faces of that Charioteer
 Had their eyes banded; little profit brings
 Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,
 Nor then avail the beams that quench the sun,—
 Or that with banded eyes could pierce the sphere
 Of all that is, has been or will be done;
 So ill was the car guided—but it passed
 With solemn speed majestically on.
 The crowd gave way, and I arose aghast,
 Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance,
 And saw, like clouds upon the thunder-blast,
 The million with fierce song and maniac dance
 Raging around—such seemed the jubilee
 As when to greet some conqueror's advance
 Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea
 From senate-house, and forum, and theatre,
 When ... upon the free
 Had bound a yoke, which soon they stooped to bear.
 Nor wanted here the just similitude
 Of a triumphal pageant, for where'er

The chariot rolled, a captive multitude
 Was driven;—all those who had grown old in power
 Or misery,—all who had their age subdued
 By action or by suffering, and whose hour
 Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe,
 So that the trunk survived both fruit and flower;—
 All those whose fame or infamy must grow
 Till the great winter lay the form and name
 Of this green earth with them for ever low;—
 All but the sacred few who could not tame
 Their spirits to the conquerors—but as soon
 As they had touched the world with living flame,
 Fled back like eagles to their native noon,
 Or those who put aside the diadem
 Of earthly thrones or gems...
 Were there, of Athens or Jerusalem.
 Were neither mid the mighty captives seen,
 Nor mid the ribald crowd that followed them,
 Nor those who went before fierce and obscene.
 The wild dance maddens in the van, and those
 Who lead it—fleet as shadows on the green,
 Outspeed the chariot, and without repose
 Mix with each other in tempestuous measure
 To savage music, wilder as it grows,
 They, tortured by their agonizing pleasure,
 Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun
 Of that fierce Spirit, whose unholy leisure
 Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,
 Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair;
 And in their dance round her who dims the sun,
 Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air
 As their feet twinkle; they recede, and now
 Bending within each other's atmosphere,
 Kindle invisibly—and as they glow,
 Like moths by light attracted and repelled,
 Oft to their bright destruction come and go,
 Till like two clouds into one vale impelled,
 That shake the mountains when their lightnings mingle
 And die in rain—the fiery band which held
 Their natures, snaps—while the shock still may tingle
 One falls and then another in the path
 Senseless—nor is the desolation single,
 Yet ere I can say WHERE—the chariot hath
 Passed over them—nor other trace I find
 But as of foam after the ocean's wrath

Is spent upon the desert shore;—behind,
 Old men and women foully disarrayed,
 Shake their gray hairs in the insulting wind,
 And follow in the dance, with limbs decayed,
 Seeking to reach the light which leaves them still
 Farther behind and deeper in the shade.
 But not the less with impotence of will
 They wheel, though ghastly shadows interpose
 Round them and round each other, and fulfil
 Their work, and in the dust from whence they rose
 Sink, and corruption veils them as they lie,
 And past in these performs what ... in those.
 Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
 Half to myself I said—'And what is this?
 Whose shape is that within the car? And why—'
 I would have added—'is all here amiss?—'
 But a voice answered—'Life!'—I turned, and knew
 (O Heaven, have mercy on such wretchedness!)
 That what I thought was an old root which grew
 To strange distortion out of the hill side,
 Was indeed one of those deluded crew,
 And that the grass, which methought hung so wide
 And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
 And that the holes he vainly sought to hide,
 Were or had been eyes:—'If thou canst forbear
 To join the dance, which I had well forborne,'
 Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware,
 'I will unfold that which to this deep scorn
 Led me and my companions, and relate
 The progress of the pageant since the morn;
 'If thirst of knowledge shall not then abate,
 Follow it thou even to the night, but I
 Am weary.'—Then like one who with the weight
 Of his own words is staggered, wearily
 He paused; and ere he could resume, I cried:
 'First, who art thou?'—'Before thy memory,
 'I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did and died,
 And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
 Had been with purer nutriment supplied,
 'Corruption would not now thus much inherit
 Of what was once Rousseau,—nor this disguise
 Stain that which ought to have disdained to wear it;
 'If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
 A thousand beacons from the spark I bore'—
 'And who are those chained to the car?'—'The wise,

'The great, the unforgotten,—they who wore
 Mitres and helms and crowns, or wreaths of light,
 Signs of thought's empire over thought—their lore
 'Taught them not this, to know themselves; their might
 Could not repress the mystery within,
 And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night
 'Caught them ere evening.'—'Who is he with chin
 Upon his breast, and hands crossed on his chain?'—
 'The child of a fierce hour; he sought to win
 'The world, and lost all that it did contain
 Of greatness, in its hope destroyed; and more
 Of fame and peace than virtue's self can gain
 'Without the opportunity which bore
 Him on its eagle pinions to the peak
 From which a thousand climbers have before
 'Fallen, as Napoleon fell.'—I felt my cheek
 Alter, to see the shadow pass away,
 Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak
 That every pigmy kicked it as it lay;
 And much I grieved to think how power and will
 In opposition rule our mortal day,
 And why God made irreconcilable
 Good and the means of good; and for despair
 I half disdained mine eyes' desire to fill
 With the spent vision of the times that were
 And scarce have ceased to be.—'Dost thou behold,'
 Said my guide, 'those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire,
 'Frederick, and Paul, Catherine, and Leopold,
 And hoary anarchs, demagogues, and sage—
 names which the world thinks always old,
 'For in the battle Life and they did wage,
 She remained conqueror. I was overcome
 By my own heart alone, which neither age,
 'Nor tears, nor infamy, nor now the tomb
 Could temper to its object.'—'Let them pass,'
 I cried, 'the world and its mysterious doom
 'Is not so much more glorious than it was,
 That I desire to worship those who drew
 New figures on its false and fragile glass
 'As the old faded.'—'Figures ever new
 Rise on the bubble, paint them as you may;
 We have but thrown, as those before us threw,
 'Our shadows on it as it passed away.
 But mark how chained to the triumphal chair
 The mighty phantoms of an elder day;

'All that is mortal of great Plato there
 Expiates the joy and woe his master knew not;
 The star that ruled his doom was far too fair.
 'And life, where long that flower of Heaven grew not,
 Conquered that heart by love, which gold, or pain,
 Or age, or sloth, or slavery could subdue not.
 'And near him walk the ... twain,
 The tutor and his pupil, whom Dominion
 Followed as tame as vulture in a chain.
 'The world was darkened beneath either pinion
 Of him whom from the flock of conquerors
 Fame singled out for her thunder-bearing minion;
 'The other long outlived both woes and wars,
 Throned in the thoughts of men, and still had kept
 The jealous key of Truth's eternal doors,
 'If Bacon's eagle spirit had not leapt
 Like lightning out of darkness—he compelled
 The Proteus shape of Nature, as it slept
 'To wake, and lead him to the caves that held
 The treasure of the secrets of its reign.
 See the great bards of elder time, who quelled
 'The passions which they sung, as by their strain
 May well be known: their living melody
 Tempers its own contagion to the vein
 'Of those who are infected with it—I
 Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!
 And so my words have seeds of misery—
 'Even as the deeds of others, not as theirs.'
 And then he pointed to a company,
 'Midst whom I quickly recognized the heirs
 Of Caesar's crime, from him to Constantine;
 The anarch chiefs, whose force and murderous snares
 Had founded many a sceptre-bearing line,
 And spread the plague of gold and blood abroad:
 And Gregory and John, and men divine,
 Who rose like shadows between man and God;
 Till that eclipse, still hanging over heaven,
 Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode,
 For the true sun it quenched—'Their power was given
 But to destroy,' replied the leader:—'I
 Am one of those who have created, even
 'If it be but a world of agony.'—
 'Whence camest thou? and whither goest thou?
 How did thy course begin?' I said, 'and why?

'Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow
 Of people, and my heart sick of one sad thought—
 Speak!'—'Whence I am, I partly seem to know,
 'And how and by what paths I have been brought
 To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;—
 Why this should be, my mind can compass not;
 'Whither the conqueror hurries me, still less;—
 But follow thou, and from spectator turn
 Actor or victim in this wretchedness,
 'And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn
 From thee. Now listen:—In the April prime,
 When all the forest-tips began to burn
 'With kindling green, touched by the azure clime
 Of the young season, I was laid asleep
 Under a mountain, which from unknown time
 'Had yawned into a cavern, high and deep;
 And from it came a gentle rivulet,
 Whose water, like clear air, in its calm sweep
 'Bent the soft grass, and kept for ever wet
 The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove
 With sounds, which whoso hears must needs forget
 'All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love,
 Which they had known before that hour of rest;
 A sleeping mother then would dream not of
 'Her only child who died upon the breast
 At eventide—a king would mourn no more
 The crown of which his brows were dispossessed
 'When the sun lingered o'er his ocean floor
 To gild his rival's new prosperity.
 'Thou wouldst forget thus vainly to deplore
 'Ills, which if ill can find no cure from thee,
 The thought of which no other sleep will quell,
 Nor other music blot from memory,
 'So sweet and deep is the oblivious spell;
 And whether life had been before that sleep
 The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell
 'Like this harsh world in which I woke to weep,
 I know not. I arose, and for a space
 The scene of woods and waters seemed to keep,
 Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
 Of light diviner than the common sun
 Sheds on the common earth, and all the place
 'Was filled with magic sounds woven into one
 Oblivious melody, confusing sense
 Amid the gliding waves and shadows dun;

'And, as I looked, 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's maze
 With winding paths of emerald fire; there stood
 'Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze
 Of his own glory, on the vibrating
 Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,
 'A Shape all light, which with one hand did fling
 Dew on the earth, as if she were the dawn,
 And the invisible rain did ever sing
 'A silver music on the mossy lawn;
 And still before me on the dusky grass,
 Iris her many-coloured scarf had drawn:
 'In her right hand she bore a crystal glass,
 Mantling with bright Nepenthe; the fierce splendour
 Fell from her as she moved under the mass
 'Of the deep cavern, and with palms so tender,
 Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow,
 Glided along the river, and did bend her
 'Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow
 Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream
 That whispered with delight to be its pillow.
 '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 air which roughened the moist amethyst,
 'Or the faint morning beams that fell among
 The trees, or the soft shadows of the trees;
 And her feet, ever to the ceaseless song
 'Of leaves, and winds, and waves, and birds, and bees,
 And falling drops, moved in a measure new
 Yet sweet, as on the summer evening breeze,
 'Up from the lake a shape of golden dew
 Between two rocks, athwart the rising moon,
 Dances i' the wind, where never eagle flew;
 'And 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; and soon
 'All that was, seemed as if it had been not;
 And all the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
 Her feet like embers; and she, thought by thought,

'Trampled its sparks into the dust of death
 As day upon the threshold of the east
 Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath
 'Of darkness re-illumine even the least
 Of heaven's living eyes—like day she came,
 Making the night a dream; and ere she ceased
 'To move, as one between desire and shame
 Suspended, I said—If, as it doth seem,
 Thou comest from the realm without a name
 'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
 Show whence I came, and where I am, and why—
 Pass not away upon the passing stream.
 'Arise and quench thy thirst, was her reply.
 And as a shut lily stricken by the wand
 Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,
 'I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
 Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
 And suddenly my brain became as sand
 'Where the first wave had more than half erased
 The track of deer on desert Labrador;
 Whilst the wolf, from which they fled amazed,
 'Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore,
 Until the second bursts;—so on my sight
 Burst a new vision, never seen before,
 'And the fair shape waned in the coming light,
 As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
 From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite
 'Of sunrise, ere it tinge the mountain-tops;
 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,
 The host of a forgotten form of sleep;
 A light of heaven, whose half-extinguished beam
 'Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
 Glimmers, for ever sought, for ever lost;
 So did that shape its obscure tenour keep

'Beside my path, as silent as a ghost;
 But the new Vision, and the cold bright car,
 With solemn speed and stunning music, crossed
 'The forest, and as if from some dread war
 Triumphantly returning, the loud million
 Fiercely extolled the fortune of her star.
 'A moving arch of victory, the vermilion
 And green and azure plumes of Iris had
 Built high over her wind-winged pavilion,
 'And underneath aethereal glory clad
 The wilderness, and far before her flew
 The tempest of the splendour, which forbade
 'Shadow to fall from leaf and stone; the crew
 Seemed in that light, like atomies to dance
 Within a sunbeam;—some upon the new
 'Embroidery of flowers, that did enhance
 The grassy vesture of the desert, played,
 Forgetful of the chariot's swift advance;
 'Others stood gazing, till within the shade
 Of the great mountain its light left them dim;
 Others outspeeded it; and others made
 'Circles around it, like the clouds that swim
 Round the high moon in a bright sea of air;
 And more did follow, with exulting hymn,
 'The chariot and the captives fettered there:—
 But all like bubbles on an eddying flood
 Fell into the same track at last, and were
 'Borne onward.—I among the multitude
 Was swept—me, sweetest flowers delayed not long;
 Me, not the shadow nor the solitude;
 'Me, not that falling stream's Lethean song;
 Me, not the phantom of that early Form
 Which moved upon its motion—but among
 'The thickest billows of that living storm
 I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime
 Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.
 'Before the chariot had begun to climb
 The opposing steep of that mysterious dell,
 Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme
 'Of him who from the lowest depths of hell,
 Through every paradise and through all glory,
 Love led serene, and who returned to tell
 'The words of hate and awe; the wondrous story
 How all things are transfigured except Love;
 For deaf as is a sea, which wrath makes hoary,

'The world can hear not the sweet notes that move
 The sphere whose light is melody to lovers—
 A wonder worthy of his rhyme.—The grove
 'Grew dense with shadows to its inmost covers,
 The earth was gray with phantoms, and the air
 Was peopled with dim forms, as when there hovers
 'A flock of vampire-bats before the glare
 Of the tropic sun, bringing, ere evening,
 Strange night upon some Indian isle;—thus were
 'Phantoms diffused around; and some did fling
 Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves,
 Behind them; some like eaglets on the wing
 'Were lost in the white day; others like elves
 Danced in a thousand unimagined shapes
 Upon the sunny streams and grassy shelves;
 'And others sate chattering like restless apes
 On vulgar hands, ...
 Some made a cradle of the ermined capes
 'Of kingly mantles; some across the tiar
 Of pontiffs sate like vultures; others played
 Under the crown which girt with empire
 'A baby's or an idiot's brow, and made
 Their nests in it. The old anatomies
 Sate hatching their bare broods under the shade
 'Of daemon wings, and laughed from their dead eyes
 To reassume the delegated power,
 Arrayed in which those worms did monarchize,
 'Who made this earth their charnel. Others more
 Humble, like falcons, sate upon the fist
 Of common men, and round their heads did soar;
 Or like small gnats and flies, as thick as mist
 On evening marshes, thronged about the brow
 Of lawyers, statesmen, priest and theorist;—
 'And others, like discoloured flakes of snow
 On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair,
 Fell, and were melted by the youthful glow
 'Which they extinguished; and, like tears, they were
 A veil to those from whose faint lids they rained
 In drops of sorrow. I became aware
 'Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained
 The track in which we moved. After brief space,
 From every form the beauty slowly waned;
 'From every firmest limb and fairest face
 The strength and freshness fell like dust, and left
 The action and the shape without the grace

'Of life. The marble brow of youth was cleft
With care; and in those eyes where once hope shone,
Desire, like a lioness bereft
'Of her last cub, glared ere it died; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown
'In autumn evening from a poplar tree.
Each like himself and like each other were
At first; but some distorted seemed to be
'Obscure clouds, moulded by the casual air;
And of this stuff the car's creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there,
'As the sun shapes the clouds; thus on the way
Mask after mask fell from the countenance
And form of all; and long before the day
'Was old, the joy which waked like heaven's glance
The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died;
And some grew weary of the ghastly dance,
'And fell, as I have fallen, by the wayside;—
Those soonest from whose forms most shadows passed,
And least of strength and beauty did abide.
'Then, what is life? I cried.'—

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