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Percy Bysshe Shelley

The Triumph of Life

1824

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# 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 unclose  
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

'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.'—

'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;

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,

'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

'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 outsped it; and others made

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;

'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,



'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,

'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 leapt  
'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