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## Answering the Question: 'What is Life?'

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Percy Bysshe Shelley's final poem, 'The Triumph of Life'—cut short by Shelley's death by drowning on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1822—offers a series of dream visions in which life's triumphal procession appears. Early on in the first vision, the poem's narrator encounters the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who will come to serve as the narrator's commentator and guide as they witness the progress of life's chariot. The great and the many of European history are chained to this chariot, and thereby revealed as the captive victims of life. Yet neither Rousseau nor the narrator can fully comprehend what it is that they are witnessing. This confusion is arguably a consequence of the poem's subject matter. 'How can we have a "Triumph", in the manner of Petrarch's great series of poems, not of the usual subjects of love, fame or death, but a "Triumph" of life, the very element in which we move and have our being?' Paul Hamilton asks, pointing to the impossible pretension at the heart of the poem—how could anyone living claim a comprehensive perspective on life?<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, even though the poem's title promises the triumph of life, the poem's narrative is continually punctured by the question 'What is Life?'—as if the poem does not know what it is trying to represent. The question appears in various formulations throughout the poem: it is first posed by the poem's narrator when he sees the triumphal procession, and he later asks the same question of Rousseau, who in turn repeats it in his own dream vision of life's triumph.<sup>2</sup>

Each time the question is posed, the poem unfolds into yet another vision of the triumphal procession. As dream vision gives way to dream vision, each successive vision seems to efface its predecessor, but since all the poem's visions contain the same triumphal procession, each successive vision also repeats the predecessor it effaces. 'The Triumph of Life' repeatedly asks what life is and answers its questions with a recurring vision of the triumphal procession of life. The poem's irony is that it literally answers the question—it shows life—but this without answering it, since does not explain what life is. 'As many commentators have remarked, the attempt to discursively grasp life in this poem is overwhelmed by the unstoppable perpetuation of life itself. There is no ending to speak of here, other than the poem's curtailment in Shelley's death,' Ross Wilson writes in his study of Shelley's philosophy of life.<sup>3</sup> Shelley's death interrupts the poem's successive visions of life, and leaves it up to the reader to answer the poem's questions. Orrin N. C. Wang notes that 'one historically reconstructed "The Triumph of Life" by coming to terms with the unanswered

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hamilton, 'Poetics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 177–92, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'The Triumph of Life', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman (New York, NY and London: W. W. Norton and Co, 2002), pp. 481–500, ll. 177–9; l. 199; l. 208; ll. 296–7; l. 398. All references to Shelley's works are to this edition, hereafter abbreviated as SPP.

<sup>3</sup> Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 167.

questions left hanging at the end of the fragment. By speculating on how Shelley would have answered that question, one “completed” the poem.’<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I focus on Jacques Derrida’s attempt to answer the poem’s questions in ‘Survivre/Journal de Bord’ (‘Living On/Border Lines’). Characteristically, rather than answering the poem’s questions, Derrida adds some of his own. In like manner, I will also refrain from giving any definitive answers; instead, I offer five reflections that present themselves when one reads back from Derrida’s questioning to the questions in Shelley’s work.

## 1.

The irony of Shelley dying while writing a poem entitled ‘The Triumph of Life’ has not been lost on his readers. From its first publication in Mary Shelley’s edition of Shelley’s *Posthumous Poems* (1824), editors have tended to heighten the irony by suppressing the last five lines of the poetic fragment, thereby letting it end with the narrator’s words: “‘Then, what is life?’ I said. . . .”<sup>5</sup> ‘No answer but Shelley’s death was given,’ Sylva Norman suggests, as if forgetting that it is Shelley’s narrator and not Shelley himself who asks ‘what is life?’<sup>6</sup> Norman’s elision of the difference between the narrator and Shelley when it comes to this final question is not untypical. ‘Shelley’s own death, which left the poem “unfinished,” has revealed the profound uncertainties in our cultural and critical attitudes toward death and authorship,’ Hugh Roberts writes.<sup>7</sup> Although most literary scholarship of the last half century has moved away from biographical readings, Shelley’s death continues to resonate in the critical reception of his last poem. Even literary theory’s most rigorous close reader, Paul de Man, places Shelley’s dead body ‘in the margins of the last manuscript page’, where, he asserts, it ‘has become an inseparable part of the poem.’<sup>8</sup> The disfiguration at stake in de Man’s reading of ‘The Triumph of Life’ is purportedly the self-generative unravelling of figurative language performed by the positing power of figuration, but it is also and necessarily (or so de Man insists) ‘the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley’s body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici’. It is this, rather than anything that happens on the page, that de Man terms the poem’s ‘decisive textual articulation’. By calling his piece ‘Shelley Disfigured’, de Man underlines that it is Shelley himself, rather than the rhetorical figures in his work, who is the ultimate subject of disfiguration. Ross Woodman’s article on Shelley, subtitled ‘Reading Shelley after de Man’, goes even further and inscribes Shelley’s drowned and disfigured corpse among the historical characters that the poem represents: ‘Shelley disfigured, [is] a “defaced body” that as shade,

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<sup>4</sup> Orrin N. C. Wang, ‘Disfiguring Monuments: History in Paul De Man’s “Shelley Disfigured” and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”’, *ELH*, 58 (1991), 633–655 (p. 635).

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Triumph of Life’, l. 544, SPP, p. 500.

<sup>6</sup> Sylva Norman, *Flight of the Skylark: The Development of Shelley’s Reputation* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> This and the following three quotes are from Paul de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 93–123, p. 120.

shadow, phantom constitutes all the figures in *The Triumph of Life*.<sup>9</sup> Shelley's dead figure both replicates and effaces the historical figures who appear chained to life's triumphal chariot, much like each of the poem's successive visions of life both repeats and effaces the one before it. In this way, Shelley's death is incorporated into the poem's figurative structure.

The ease with which Woodman can move between Shelley's corpse and his poetic imagery points to a morbid element contained in the poem itself. Already William Hazlitt, one of the poem's first reviewers, recognised that 'The Triumph of Life' is actually 'a ghastly Dance of Death.'<sup>10</sup> And yet, the dance of death and the triumph of life are not opposites, but rather two sides of the same coin: life's triumph over the living is precisely their death. If Shelley's poem sets out to celebrate life's victory in a triumphal procession, then inevitably the captives chained to its car will be 'those whom Life will unhesitatingly crush' in the words of Shelley's biographer Richard Holmes.<sup>11</sup> The poet cannot hope to escape the fate of the historical figures who succumb to life in his poem—and neither can his readers. Shelley's death, that is, life's triumph over Shelley, may put an end to the poem entitled 'The Triumph of Life,' but it cannot arrest life's triumphal progress over the living. Therefore Michael O'Neill suggests that 'the fragmentary form imposed on *The Triumph of Life* by Shelley's untimely death seems in keeping with the poem's deepest instincts.'<sup>12</sup> Just as it seems impossible to read the poem's ending without recalling Shelley's end, so it seems impossible to imagine a satisfactory end to the poem's repeated visions of life: the poem has to remain fragmented because its very subject matter—life—resists conclusion. But even the conclusion that the poem can have no conclusion introduces a finality that the poem itself works hard to invalidate. Since each of its visions of life dissolves into a further vision of life, the only lesson that the poem can be said to teach is that life exceeds attempts to figure life—the poem reveals that it cannot reveal life.

## 2.

Derrida answers the questions left hanging at the end of Shelley's fragment by posing a double question: 'Mais qui parle de vivre? Autrement dit sur vivre?' ('But who is talking about living? In other words on living?')<sup>13</sup> Whereas James Hulbert's English translation foregrounds the signatory—*who* is talking about living?—Derrida's French formulations draws our attention to the difference between talking *de* (about) and talking *sur* (on) living, especially since talking *sur vivre* (on living) is almost already to be talking *survivre* (survival,

<sup>9</sup> Ross Woodman, 'Figuring Disfiguration: Reading Shelley after de Man,' *Studies in Romanticism*, 40 (2001), 253–88 (p. 264).

<sup>10</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe [sic] Shelley. 8vo. pp. 400 London, 1824, J. & H. L. Hunt,' in *Edinburgh Review* XL (1824), reprinted in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe (London: Frank Cass & Company Ltd., 1967), xvi, pp. 265–84, p. 273.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 720.

<sup>12</sup> Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 200.

<sup>13</sup> 'Survivre/Journal de Bord', in *Parages* (Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1986), pp. 117–218, p. 119; 'Living On/Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom and others, trans. by James Hulbert (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 75–176, p. 75; hereafter abbreviated as S/J and L/B respectively.

to survive). To talk *sur vivre* is not merely to talk on living but to be living on, while talking. Derrida highlights that these inflections emerge from the range of meanings that opens up between the words *de* and *sur*:

Par exemple, plusieurs paires de guillemets pour un ou deux mots: « survivre », « sur » vivre, « sur » « vivre », sur « vivre », autant d'effets sémantiques et syntaxiques hétérogènes [...] Traduisant (à peu près, autrement) le *de*, du moins en latin ou dans ma langue, sur vient aussitôt contaminer ce qu'il traduit des sens qu'il importe à son tour, de ces autres sens qui travaillent « sur-vivre » ou « sur » vivre ou « sur » « vivre » (*super*, *hyper*, *over*, *über*, et même *above*, et encore *beyond*).

For example, several pairs of quotation marks may enclose one or two words: “living on” [“survivre”], “on” living [“sur” vivre], “on” “living,” on “living,” producing each time a different semantic and syntactic effect [...] Translating (almost, in other words) the Latin *dē*, the French *de*, or the English “of,” “on” immediately comes to contaminate what it translates with meanings that it imports in its turn, those other meanings that rework “living on” or “surviving” (*super*, *hyper*, “over,” *über*, and even “above” and “beyond”).<sup>14</sup>

Despite the difference between talking *de vivre* and talking *sur vivre*, the words *sur* and *de* turn out to translate into one another so that it is no longer clear whether one is talking about two words (*sur* and *de*) or merely one (*sur* translated into *de* or the other way around). This ambiguity transforms the meaning of both words, a transformative translation that both sets the tone for and undermines what follows: ‘Faute de pouvoir jamais saturer un contexte, quelle lecture aura jamais raison du « sur » de survivre?’ (‘Forever unable to saturate a context, what reading will ever master the “on” of living on?’)<sup>15</sup> The excess of meaning contained in the preposition(s) *de/sur* also transforms the meaning of Shelley’s title (which Derrida cites in English in his French text). ‘The Triumph of Life’ can mean life’s triumph as well as its opposite: ‘le triomphe *de* la vie peut aussi triompher *de* la vie et renverser la procession du génitif.’ (‘the triumph *of* life can also triumph *over* life and reverse the procession of the genitive.’)<sup>16</sup> In this manner, Derrida uses translation, what he terms ‘la procession d’une langue dans une autre’ (‘the procession of one language into another’), in order to generate meaning even as he leaves the starting point of this procession—the title ‘The Triumph of Life’—untranslated.<sup>17</sup> It is the passage of meaning through more or less incomplete translation that, according to Derrida, constitutes the life of a text. ‘Un texte ne vit que s’il sur-vit, et il ne sur-vit que s’il est *à la fois* traductible et intraduisible [...] La traduction triomphante n’est donc ni la vie ni la mort du texte, seulement ou déjà sa survie.’ (‘A text lives only if it lives *on* {*sur-vit*}, and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable [...] Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living *on*, its life after life, its life after death.’)<sup>18</sup> Crucially, Derrida does not use translation as a metaphor for the afterlife of texts, he uses translation in a more literal,

<sup>14</sup> S/J, p. 120; L/B, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121; *ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121; *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121; *ibid.*, p. 77. ‘Survivre/Journal de Bord’ was commissioned for the English language essay collection *Deconstruction and Criticism*, and can therefore be said to be written for translation.

<sup>18</sup> S/J pp. 147-8; L/B pp. 102-3.

if creative, sense: he triumphantly translates 'The Triumph of Life' into a triumph over life, a life after life, in other words living on, *sur vivre*, *survivre* after death.

Should one follow the trajectory set by Derrida's translation, the survival that brings texts to life leads to Walter Benjamin's 'Lehre vom Leben und Fortleben der Werke' ['doctrine of the life and afterlife of works of art'].<sup>19</sup> In his essay on 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' ('The Task of the Translator'), Benjamin describes the *Leben*, life, of artistic works as a form of *Fortleben*, afterlife, or, more literally, a living forth or living on:

In völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit ist der Gedanke vom Leben und Fortleben der Kunstwerke zu erfassen. [...] Vielmehr nur wenn allem demjenigen, wovon es Geschichte gibt und was nicht allein ihr Schauplatz ist, Leben zuerkannt wird, kommt dessen Begriff zu seinem Recht. Denn von der Geschichte, nicht von der Natur aus, geschweige von so schwankender wie Empfindung und Seele, ist zuletzt der Umkreis des Lebens zu bestimmen.

The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. [...] The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul.<sup>20</sup>

Since life is participation in history, the life of a literary work is found in the history of its readings, where each reading translates the text in a way that reveals new aspects of its meaning. By evoking the concepts of translation and afterlife, the passage from 'Survivre/Journal de Bord' places itself in a supplementary relation to Derrida's discussion of Benjamin's translation essay in 'Des Tours de Babel.' Derrida describes the latter essay as an attempt 'de traduire à ma manière la traduction d'un autre texte sur la traduction' ('to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation')<sup>21</sup> namely Maurice de Gandillac's 1971 translation of 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers.' In this other act of translation, too, Derrida foregrounds *survivre*:

[C]'est au contraire à partir d'un pensée de la langue et de sa "survie" en traduction que nous accéderions à la pensée de ce que vie [...] veulent dire. Ce retournement est expressément opéré par Benjamin. Sa préface [...] circule sans cesse entre le valeurs de semence, de vie, et surtout de "survie".

[I]t is rather starting from the notion of a language and its "sur-vival" in translation that we could have access to the notion of what life [...] mean[s]. This reversal is operated expressly by

<sup>19</sup> The designation of Walter Benjamin's ideas on life and afterlife as a doctrine comes from Uwe Steiner, 'Exemplarische Kritik: Anmerkungen zu Benjamins Kritik der *Wahlverwandtschaften*,' in *Benjamins Wahlverwandtschaften: zur Kritik einer Programmatistischen Interpretation*, ed. by Helmut Hühn, Jan Urblich, and Uwe Steiner (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), pp. 37-67, p. 50; my translation.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1999), iv, pp. 9-21, p. 11; 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press), i, pp. 253-63, p. 255. Hereafter Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* are abbreviated as GS and the translations in the *Selected Writings* as SW followed by volume and page number(s).

<sup>21</sup> 'Des Tours de Babel,' in *Difference in Translation*, ed. & trans. by Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), in French: pp. 209-48; in English: pp. 165-207, French p. 218; English p. 175.

Benjamin. His preface [...] circulates without cease among the values of seed, life, and especially “sur-vival”.<sup>22</sup>

The way in which an original lives on in its translation—even when each and every one of its constituent words has been replaced by a word in the new language—becomes a model for the meaning of life: life survives even after everything living has been transformed into something new. But, equally importantly, by writing on Benjamin’s concept of *Fortleben*, Derrida’s text not only describes a conception of afterlife, but represents this conception in action: Benjamin’s text lives on in Derrida’s reading. Although Benjamin only discusses translation, in fact all subsequently derived texts—including rewritings, adaptations, and critical interpretations—are part of the afterlife of a text. Furthermore, any living text itself draws on prior texts, thereby participating in the afterlife of earlier works. As Benjamin goes on to state: ‘Die Geschichte der großen Kunstwerke kennt ihre Deszendenz aus den Quellen, ihre Gestaltung im Zeitalter des Künstlers und die Periode ihres grundsätzlich ewigen Fortlebens bei den nachfolgenden Generationen.’ (‘The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.’)<sup>23</sup> Great artworks form a transhistorical, intertextual constellation which is ever-expanding as new generations discover new ways of reading the works of their predecessors. Like the life of the living, the afterlife of artworks goes on without conclusion. Accordingly, no work of art can be said to be complete in the present. In his ‘Defence of Poetry’, Shelley offers a comparable conception of the life of literary works when he writes that ‘it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour’ of poetic compositions and, furthermore, that ‘no living poet ever arrived at the fullness of his fame’ because the full potential of a literary work only unfolds over time.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, like Shelley, uses the word ‘fame’ to characterise the posthumous maturing of a work, stating that the *Fortleben* of works ‘heißt, wo es zutage tritt, Ruhm’ (‘[where it] manifests itself, it is called fame’).<sup>25</sup>

The emphasis on afterlife in succeeding generations turns a poem’s creative readers into its co-authors; Shelley even goes so far as to assert that all of history is a single ‘cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men.’<sup>26</sup> Poets and statesmen of all ages participate in writing and rewriting this poem. Shelley’s idea can be contrasted with Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence. In the first sentence of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom writes: ‘Shelley speculated that poets of all ages contributed to one Great Poem perpetually in progress.’<sup>27</sup> Shelley’s speculation serves to introduce Bloom’s theory of poetry, according to which each young poet, or ephebe, engages in battle with a ‘strong’ predecessor poet, agonistically wrestling with his masterpieces to compose a new work. However, the ancient cyclic poets to whom Shelley refers do not quite match Bloom’s conception of strong predecessors. The

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, French p. 222; English p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> GS4, p. 11; SW1, p. 255.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Defence of Poetry,’ SPP, p. 516.

<sup>25</sup> GS4, p. 11; SW1, p. 255.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Defence of Poetry,’ SPP, p. 523.

<sup>27</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 19.

cyclic epics predate the Homeric epics and if they had any individual authors, their names are long forgotten and the texts themselves only preserved through citations in the works of later authors. By calling all of poetry a cyclic poem, Shelley evokes an anonymous collaboration that stretches over generations rather than a personal, agonistic struggle with a specific predecessor poet, which is what Bloom has in mind. Bloom's allusion to Shelley, therefore, is yet another example of how critical reading transforms the text being read. In Bloom's own critical language this slight shift may be called an act of misprision, a wilful misinterpretation or misreading: '*Poetic Influence*' he writes in a statement of his central principle, '*always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, a act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation.*'<sup>28</sup> Although Bloom is at pains to separate the agnostic struggle between poets from the misinterpretations inherent in critical reading, his own reading also engages in creative misinterpretation as Shelley's anonymously and collaboratively composed 'cyclic poem' becomes 'one Great Poem' written in a combat between strong poets.

Bloom's discussion of influence can also be contrasted with Benjamin's conception of *Fortleben*: whereas Bloom describes a violent misinterpretation, Benjamin, who after all defines *Fortleben* in an essay on translation, emphasises the continuity between the primary and the derived text. In an earlier essay, 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen' ('On Language as Such and on the Language of Man'), Benjamin had asserted that: 'Die Übersetzung ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere durch ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen. Kontinua der Verwandlung, nicht abstrakte Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke durchmißt die Übersetzung.' ('Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity.')<sup>29</sup> In a similar manner, works live on by being entered into a continuum of transformations in the writings of later readers. But this transformation also has a certain destructive potential. No sooner has the poem left the pen of its author than its readers are free to transform it into something new. In his 'Ode to the West Wind' Shelley highlights this process when he implores the West Wind to

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,  
  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!<sup>30</sup>

The 'withered leaves' to which the poet's 'dead thoughts' are likened are a conventional pun on the leaves of paper on which said thoughts are written. But even though Shelley describes his thoughts as 'dead' it is these very thoughts that will lead to a new birth: they are at once

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<sup>28</sup> Bloom, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> GS2, p. 151; SW1, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> 'Ode to the West Wind', ll. 63-7, SPP, pp. 300-1.



ashes, a burned-out residue of thought, and the sparks to kindle further thought.<sup>31</sup> In a reading of this passage, Luke Donahue comments:

The living meaning of his [Shelley's] poems might be destroyed, but this very destruction is precisely what allows them to have a future. Only if they cannot be exhaustively read now, can they be read in the future; and only because they cannot be exhaustively read in the future, can they have a future beyond any foreseeable future, beyond what one might call the future present. The death of poetry's full meaning offers it an afterlife.<sup>32</sup>

Just as new life springs from the organic decay of last summer's yield, so it is by continually dying in the present that poetry lives on in the future. As a poem is being read and re-read, it gives rise to new poems, critical interpretations, or translations, each time transforming it into something new. At the extreme, it may not even be the same poem any more, yet at the same time it is precisely such adaptations and translations—in short, such small destructions of the original meaning—that form the medium in which the poem stays alive. A work's death by destruction is its afterlife.

### 3.

'Survivre/Journal de Bord' has a double title because it is a double essay: a footnote spans the length of the piece, dividing the page in two. 'Survivre' is a reading of Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'; 'Journal de Bord' is a reading of Maurice Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence*), a novella in which the narrator watches by the deathbed of a terminally ill woman.<sup>33</sup> After the moment of her death, she comes alive again, remaining for a while in state suspended between life and death. The afterlives of Blanchot's and Shelley's texts are intertwined in Derrida's essay, appropriately, since both texts thematise the porous boundary between life and death—a boundary typographically evoked in the black line that divides the main body of Derrida's essay from its co-extensive footnote. While the body of the text and the footnote remain cordoned off in their separate spaces, set apart like life and death, the divide between the two texts is constantly trespassed upon as the argument on the top and the bottom halves of the page interrupts and comments on itself. Derrida speaks '*d'une part*' ('*on the one hand*') of Shelley's drowning '*et d'autre part* toutes les noyades dans les récits de Blanchot' ('and *on the other hand*, all the drownings in Blanchot's stories').<sup>34</sup> In talking *de* or *sur vivre*, then, Derrida talks of Shelley's drowning and the drownings in Blanchot's stories. But, as he immediately goes on to acknowledge, this is a questionable procedure:

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<sup>31</sup> Shelley often returns to the image of kindling to conceptualise the work of poetry, most famously in the 'Defence of Poetry': 'the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.' (SPP, p. 531) Daniel Hughes and Forest Pyle have offered two separate takes on Shelley's metaphors of kindling in 'Kindling and Dwindling: The Poetic Process in Shelley', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 13 (1964), 13–28 and 'Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley', *Studies in Romanticism*, 42 (2003), 427–459 respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Luke Donahue, 'Romantic Survival and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind"', *European Romantic Review*, 25 (2014), 219–44 (p. 220).

<sup>33</sup> *L'arrêt de mort* translates as 'death sentence' but can also mean 'suspension of death'.

<sup>34</sup> S/J, p. 126; L/B, p. 82.

On demandera peut-être ce que j'entends par là: est-ce que ces récits de Blanchot traitent à leur manière *The Triumph of Life* et même le prétendu inachèvement qui le sépare de sa fin, et même ce qui le tient à distance de son signataire présomptif et de sa noyade? Je ne répondrai pas à cette question pour le moment. Je la renvoie: d'où tiendrait-on que le signataire présomptif d'un écrit doive en répondre et réponde à tout moment aux questions de quiconque, en disant ce qu'il en est « au juste »?

You may ask what I mean by that: do Blanchot's stories, his *récits*, treat, in their own way *The Triumph of Life*, and even the supposed unfinished quality that separates it from its ending, and even what separates it from its supposed signatory and his drowning? For now, I shall not answer this question, but ask one of my own: What is it to say that the supposed signatory of a piece of writing must answer for it, and answer at every turn the questions of this person or that, telling him "exactly" what the "story" is?<sup>35</sup>

Derrida's question responds and corresponds to the questions within Shelley's poem. Just like the poem's narrative voices repeatedly interrupt the poem's visions of life to ask what it is that they are seeing, so Derrida interrupts his critical argument to ask what it is that he is arguing: Derrida himself, as signatory of this piece of writing, must answer for this 'story' that he is telling – asking us to read Shelley's dead body alongside the dead bodies figured in Blanchot's writings that '*évidemment, rien à voir avec la noyade de Shelley*' ('*obviously ha[ve] nothing to do with Shelley's drowning*').<sup>36</sup> It seems to be only on account of Derrida's transformative translation that this relation between a historical and a series of literary events can be established. Language turns Shelley's drowning into a narrative, which in its turn can be incorporated into a reading of his final work and be brought together with figures of drowning in Blanchot's work. Derrida's movement between Shelley's afterlife and Blanchot's figurative suspension of death [*l'arrêt de mort*] suspends Shelley's actual death and lets him, as drowned signatory, live on in readings of his work.

#### 4.

In his final interview, when Derrida comes to look back on his intellectual life, he cites Benjamin's discussion of the life of literary works as afterlife as a central point of inspiration:

Je me suis toujours intéressé à cette thématique de la survie, dont le sens ne s'ajoute pas au vivre et au mourir. Elle est originaire: la vie est survie. Survivre au sens courant veut dire continuer à vivre, mais aussi vivre après la mort. A propos de la traduction, Walter Benjamin souligne la distinction entre *überleben* d'une part, survivre à la mort, comme un livre peut survivre à la mort de l'auteur, ou un enfant à la mort des parents, et, d'autre part, *fortleben*, living on, continuer à vivre. Tous les concepts qui m'ont aidé à travailler, notamment celui de la trace ou du spectral, étaient liés au "survivre" comme dimension structurale. Elle ne dérive ni du vivre ni du mourir.

I have always been interested in the subject of survival, the meaning of which is not supplemental to life or death. It is originary: life is survival. Survival in the conventional sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death. Speaking of translation, Walter

<sup>35</sup> S/J, pp. 126-7; L/B, pp. 82-3.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125; *ibid.*, p. 81.

Benjamin took pains to distinguish between *überleben* on the one hand, to live after death, as a book can survive the death of its author, or a child the death of parents, and on the other hand, *fortleben*, living on, to keep on living. All the ideas that have helped me in my work, notably those regarding the trace or the spectral, were related to the idea of “sur-vival” as a basic dimension. It does not derive from either to live or to die.<sup>37</sup>

Derrida’s attribution of a distinction between *Überleben* and *Fortleben*—here quoted from memory—does not insofar as I see find support in Benjamin’s essay. To my mind, Benjamin uses the three formulations *Überleben*, *Fortleben* and *Nachleben* interchangeably. However, even if Derrida’s suggestion that Benjamin distinguishes between two concepts of survival is a trick that his memory plays on him, it is also an example of the kind of creative transformation that a text undergoes in its afterlife. At the same time, this transformation of Benjamin’s terms becomes one of the basic concepts in Derrida’s thought. Martin Hägglund’s recent study *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* goes so far as to make a distinction between types of continued life, immortality *versus* survival, fundamental to Derrida’s lifework. ‘The deconstructive notion of life entails that living is always a matter of *living on*, of surviving [...] this notion of survival is incompatible with immortality, since it defines life as essentially mortal and as inherently divided by time.’<sup>38</sup> Living on differs from living or dying, but it should not be understood in terms of immortality, the inability to die. Rather, living on or survival is a continuance of life with the ever-present possibility of death. Moreover, since life itself is folded between a no longer future and a not yet past, the temporality of ‘living on’ is a trace structure, permeated by what Derrida has termed *différance*. Any living moment refers to other moments in lived time, whereas immortality—a life without the possibility of death—is only thinkable outside of the differential time of mortal life. Therefore immortality is not the same as a continuance of life.

The desire to *live on* after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to remain subject to temporal finitude. [...] There is thus an internal contradiction in the so-called desire for immortality. If we were not attached to mortal life, there would be no fear of death and no desire to live on. But for the same reason, the idea of immortality cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. On the contrary, the state of immortality would annihilate every form of survival, since it would annihilate the time of mortal life.<sup>39</sup>

Associating immortality with God, Hägglund terms this turn away from immortality ‘radical atheism’, which can also be understood as a commitment to the time of life. His book shows how this commitment runs throughout Derrida’s entire oeuvre and, although he does not foreground the essay on Shelley, it is safe to presume that the deconstructive notion of survival also permeates ‘Survivre/Journal de Bord’. Since Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism* is a manifestation of Derrida’s afterlife, whereas Derrida’s ‘Survivre/Journal de Bord’ participates in the afterlife of Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’, I here read backwards in this genealogy:

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<sup>37</sup> *Apprendre à vivre enfin*, interview with Jean Birnbaum (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2005); first published in *Le Monde*, 19 August 2004; *Jacques Derrida, 1930-2004: The Last Interview*, trans. by Robert Knafo (New York, NY: SV, 2004), pp. 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 33-4.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

from *Radical Atheism* to Shelley's work. Shelley, of course, saw himself, and was seen by others, as a radical and an atheist, an image fuelled by his expulsion from University College, Oxford for co-authoring a pamphlet titled *The Necessity of Atheism*. This work, coupled with the anti-religious message of his first long poem *Queen Mab*, earned him the obituary 'Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry has been drowned; now he knows whether there is a God or no' on what would have been his thirtieth birthday.<sup>40</sup> However, Shelley's understanding of both radicalism and atheism differs from Hägglund's and it would require a separate investigation to trace how the meaning of these two words has been transformed in the interval between Shelley's death and Hägglund's monograph.

In the present context, I want to use Hägglund's distinction to examine Shelley's invocations of immortality—a desire that Hägglund regards as a misnomer for a desire to live on subject to temporal finitude. Shelley, for his part, more typically connects notions of immortality with the dignity of mankind. A characteristic statement is found in his notes to *Hellas* where Shelley asserts that 'as it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity let him be permitted to have conjectured the condition of that futurity towards which we are all impelled by an inextinguishable thirst for immortality.'<sup>41</sup> In the terms of Hägglund's reading of Derrida, this 'thirst for immortality' evidences a misuse of words: our thirst is not for immortality, but for survival. However, it is worth taking a closer look at what Shelley means by immortality when he makes it the province of the poet. First of all, the life of literary works differs from the life of living creatures—since their afterlife is a continual transformation of their meaning, they can be said to live on by being destroyed. 'The death of poetry's full meaning offers it an afterlife,' to recall Donahue's phrasing.<sup>42</sup> The immortality that poetry may grant is not reducible to life or death. Shelley's most extended exposition of poetic immortality is found in *Adonais: An Elegy Written on the Death of John Keats*. According to James Chandler *Adonais* 'describe[s] the afterlife of Keats among the writers who cared for him.'<sup>43</sup> I would slightly expand Chandler's formulation. It is not only among the writers who cared for him that Keats will live on; rather, when the poet dies, he will live on in the very realm from which his poetic inspiration sprung:

Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
Through time and change, unquenchably the same<sup>44</sup>

The poet's eternal afterlife takes place within the poetic medium in which all poets participate and which is the source of poetry as such. Projecting literary renown beyond the time of life, *Adonais* consistently distinguishes between temporal and temporary mortal life and the immortal afterlife of poetic productions—paradigmatically, Keats the person may die, but the Keats the poet will live on 'till the Future dares | Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be |

<sup>40</sup> *The Courier*, 4 Aug 1822. Cited by Holmes, p. 730.

<sup>41</sup> Notes to *Hellas*, SPP, p. 462.

<sup>42</sup> Donahue, p. 220.

<sup>43</sup> James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 484.

<sup>44</sup> *Adonais*, ll. 338-41, SPP, p. 422.

An echo and a light unto eternity!’ These words are spoken by the personified Hour of Keats’s death—‘with me | Died Adonais’, her speech begins.<sup>45</sup> ‘This Hour is past and dead,’ Peter Sacks notes:

With its death died Adonais. Is it speaking from within death, speaking with the odd death-in-life intonation of a sepulchral inscription? And since this is a persona-voice for Shelley, does it not already suggest some troubling association between Keats's death and Shelley's sense of having died with him? It is precisely this double death that the poem must avoid, or at least postpone long enough for Shelley to have immortalized himself and Keats. How else will Adonais’ fate and fame keep echoing and shining to eternity?<sup>46</sup>

The hour of Keats’s death, whose passage is part of the time of life in its differential movement from future to past, also marks Keats’s transition out of the time of life and into eternal immortality. But, as Sacks rightly points out, this passage is contingent on Shelley writing a poem that will immortalise both Keats as its subject and Shelley as its writer. What will not be forgotten is not so much Keats himself but Keats’s fate as made famous by Shelley’s poetic act of mourning. By means of the elegy *Adonais*, Keats and Shelley both become part of ‘that cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of men.’<sup>47</sup> *Adonais* represents this cyclic poem as an eternal realm ‘beyond mortal thought’ where poets of the past wait ‘robed in dazzling immortality’ to greet new arrivals.<sup>48</sup> Alongside allusions to living authors such as Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, and himself, Shelley populates this realm with dead poets, e.g. Chatterton, Sidney, and Lucan, not forgetting to mention the ‘many more, whose names on Earth are dark, | But whose transmitted effluence cannot die | So long as fire outlives the parent spark’.<sup>49</sup> In other words, *Adonais* asserts that poetry cannot die: it continues to live on as long as it offers inspiration for new generations even when its author is long dead and his or her name long forgotten.

The elegy lives up to its assertions through the intertextual web that it weaves: its opening line, ‘I weep for Adonais’, cites the opening of Bion’s lament for Adonis—‘Αἰάζω τὸν Ἄδωνιν’ (‘I wail for Adonis’)—except that Shelley transforms the name Adonis into Adonais, thereby incorporating the ancient Greek mourning cry *ai* as well as evoking the Hebrew word for God, *Adonai*.<sup>50</sup> Shelley further emphasises the connection to Bion by letting Moschus’ lament for Bion stand as one of the poem’s epigraphs. The elegy proceeds in a Spenserian stanza and builds on the pastoral elegaic tradition of Milton’s *Lycidas* all the while incorporating a sophisticated negotiation of Keats’s own poetics.<sup>51</sup> As in the ‘Ode to the West Wind’, the use

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, ll. 6-9, SPP, p. 411.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Sacks, ‘Last Clouds: A Reading of “Adonais”’ *Studies in Romanticism*, 23:3 (1984), 379-400 (p. 382).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Defence of Poetry’, SPP, p. 523.

<sup>48</sup> *Adonais*, l. 398; l. 409, SPP, p. 423; p. 424.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, ll. 406-8, SPP, p. 424; cf. *Adonais*, l. 264, l. 268, l. 271, l. 399, l. 401, l. 404.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, l. 1, SPP, p. 411; Bion, *Lament for Adonis*, in *Theocritus. Moschus. Bion*. ed. and trans. by Neil Hopkinson. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 506-17, l. 1, pp. 506-7.

<sup>51</sup> These intertexts are generally agreed upon, see e.g. Earl R. Wasserman, ‘Adonais: Progressive Revelation as a Poetic Mode’, *ELH*, 21 (1954), 274-326; H. J. Jackson, ‘The “Ai” in “Adonais”’, *The Review of English Studies*, 62 (2011), 777-84; T. P. Harrison, ‘Spenser and Shelley’s “Adonais”’, *Studies in English*, 13 (1933), 54-63; Andrew Epstein, ‘“Flowers That Mock the Corse beneath”: Shelley’s “Adonais”, Keats, and Poetic Influence’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 48 (1999), 90-128; William A. Ulmer, ‘“Adonais” and the Death of Poetry’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 32 (1993), 425-451.

of the word *spark* in relation to the poets 'whose transmitted effluence cannot die' evokes a process of kindling where the fire of poetic thought may be transmitted long after the original wording has been reduced to ashes. Thus, although the speaker of *Adonais* may lament 'that all we loved of him [Keats] should be, | But for our grief, as if it had not been. | And grief itself be mortal!' his very voicing of this lament in poetic form ensures the immortality of his grief.<sup>52</sup> The elegy lets sparks of previous poetic inspiration burn on even as it itself may kindle future elegiac efforts. But it also means that Shelley's assertion that grief is mortal contributes to making it immortal.

Much like in Hägglund's exposition of Derrida's thought, the 'dazzling immortality' in which poets are robed in *Adonais* stands outside of the time of life. In this realm the poet lives on even when the hour of his death is dead. But this realm is also accessible to living poets, as long as they are prepared to temporarily leave their mortal bodies behind.

When lofty thought  
Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,  
And love and life contend in it, for what  
Shall be its earthly doom, the dead live there  
And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air.<sup>53</sup>

Poetry is a sort of premature death in life, through which we rise from our earthly embodiment and join the dead poets in that realm 'beyond mortal thought.' Whereas mortal life is characterised by the strife between love and life, the life of the dead is an aerial movement of light over darkness. The harmony implicitly inherent in this movement suggests that posthumous afterlife is a qualitative improvement on lived life. But the poem does not merely oppose life before death and life after death to present one as superior to the other. Rather, the elegiac drive of *Adonais* offers a renegotiation of the relation between life and death so that the latter is no longer the end of life, but its foundation. 'Great and mean | Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.'<sup>54</sup> If life is borrowed from death, then death is the source of life, which is to say that the time of life is a postponement of dying. On the face of it, this statement chimes with Hägglund's assertion that 'to live on is to remain subject to temporal finitude'—in other words, to the ever-present possibility of death.<sup>55</sup> If being alive is living on with the possibility of death, then death itself is the possibility condition of life. But the poem moves towards a more radical climax: 'Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep – | He hath awakened from the dream of life'.<sup>56</sup>

The image of life as a dream introduces a further intertext: Pedro Calderón de la Barca's answer to the question 'What is Life?' in *La vida es sueño* [*Life is a Dream*]:

¿Qué es la vida? Un frenesí.  
¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión,  
una sombra, una ficción,  
y el mayor bien es pequeño;

<sup>52</sup> *Adonais*, ll. 181-3, SPP, p. 417.

<sup>53</sup> *Adonais*, ll. 392-6, SPP, p. 423.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, ll. 185-6, SPP, p. 417.

<sup>55</sup> Hägglund, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Adonais*, ll. 343-4, SPP, p. 422.

que toda la vida es sueño,  
y los sueños, sueños son.

What is life? A frenzy.  
What is life? An illusion,  
a shadow, a fiction,  
and the greatest good is small;  
for all of life is a dream,  
and the dreams, are dreams.<sup>57</sup>

Shelley had been reading and translating Calderón in the years before *Adonais* was written and his letters express almost unqualified admiration for the Spanish dramatist. Here, the intertextual allusion to Calderón's work serves to incorporate *Adonais* into the afterlife of *La vida es sueño* and, in so doing, to write it into the cyclic poem that all of poetry is. The poem itself achieves immortality in the very moment in which it describes Keats as Adonais doing so. By waking from the dream of life he not only 'has outsoared the shadow of our night',<sup>58</sup> he has escaped the process of dying that mortal life is.

– We decay  
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief  
Convulse us and consume us day by day,  
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.<sup>59</sup>

'Produktion der Leiche ist, vom Tode her betrachtet, das Leben' ('Seen from the point of view of death, life is the production of a corpse'), Benjamin writes in his study of the German *Trauerspiel*.<sup>60</sup> His formulation of the *Fortleben* of literary works is also developed in opposition to merely physiological, corpse-bound life. In both cases, to die is to be rescued from the gradual decay of body and mind. 'From the contagion of the world's slow stain | He is secure, and now can never mourn | A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain'.<sup>61</sup> Living on entails aging, which is the same as slowly dying. Therefore, putting an end to this process by dying is paradoxically a way to outwit death and the poem can conclude on a triumphant note: 'He lives, he wakes – 'tis Death is dead, not he; | Mourn not for Adonais.'<sup>62</sup> By dying, Adonais comes alive; by escaping life, he kills death.

## 5.

*Survivre* or 'living on' is Derrida's answer to the question 'Then, what is Life?' left hanging at the end of Shelley's fragment, but 'living on' is also a turn of phrase that appears in Shelley's attempt to answer the same question in his essay 'On Life':

<sup>57</sup> Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño. El alcalde de Zalamea*, ed. by Enrique Rodríguez Cepeda (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, S. A., 1999), ll. 2182-7; my translation.

<sup>58</sup> *Adonais*, l. 352, SPP, p. 422.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, ll. 348-51, SPP, p. 422.

<sup>60</sup> GS1, p. 392; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2009), p. 218.

<sup>61</sup> *Adonais*, ll. 356-8, SPP, p. 422.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, ll. 361-2, SPP, p. 422.

What is Life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life.<sup>63</sup>

Wilson's investigation of life and living in Shelley starts out from this passage and offers a transformation of Derrida's 'living on.' Wilson foregrounds the 'identity and non-identity of "living on" with living' found in Derrida's text and uses it to distinguish between 'mere life – life as it is when, often for socially, politically and economically specific reasons, we do not feel that we are alive at all [and] "the apprehension of life" that is missing from life in its reduced condition.'<sup>64</sup> Shelley's 'On Life' can be read as an instruction in how to apprehend life—above all, Shelley prescribes the dissolution of the individual self into the wonders of the world around us:

Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves. [...] And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up, this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents. Their feelings and their reasonings are the combined result of a multitude of entangled thoughts, of a series of what are called impressions, blunted by reiteration.<sup>65</sup>

As children, we apprehend life, but as we live on and grow up, the reiterative nature of experience blunts our perception of life. It is through this very reiteration that we live on and by so doing lose the apprehension of life. In this regard, there is an ironic contradiction between Shelley's and Derrida's uses of the formulation 'living on', not least in the latter's essay on Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life' where he writes: 'La traduction triomphante n'est donc ni la vie ni la mort du texte, seulement ou déjà sa survie. On en dira de même de ce que j'appelle écriture, marque, trace, etc. Ça ne vit ni ne meurt, ça survit' ('Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living *on*, its life after life, its life after death. The same thing will be said of what I call writing, mark, trace, and so on. It neither lives nor dies; it lives *on*.'<sup>66</sup> By presenting living on as analogous to his concepts of trace, mark, etc.—concepts which are all structured by his conception of iterability—Derrida makes reiteration essential to the perpetuation of living on. Shelley, on contrast, asserts that it is precisely the reiterative nature of 'living on' that deadens our apprehension of life: mere survival is a dead life. As antidote to 'living on' Shelley presents the life of poetry—strictly speaking an afterlife beyond the realm of mortal life—which has the potential to rejuvenate our apprehension of life and thereby restore us to life. 'It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration', Shelley writes of poetry in the 'Defence.'<sup>67</sup> The irreducible difference between Shelley's and Derrida's uses of the formulation 'living on' marks the degree of transformation that a text undergoes in its afterlife and it is precisely this continual transformation that undercuts the possibility of answering the question: *What is Life?*

<sup>63</sup> 'On Life', SPP, p. 506.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson, p. 3; p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> 'On Life', SPP, pp. 507-8.

<sup>66</sup> S/J pp. 147-8; L/B pp. 102-3.

<sup>67</sup> 'Defence of Poetry', SPP, p. 533.



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