

A Triumph of Black Life?

“Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed”—this is the opening sentence of Theodor Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1973) (p. 3). Similarly, anti-racist activism, which should have become obsolete a long time ago, lives on because we continually fail to realize racial justice. “Living On” (1979) is also the title of Jacques Derrida’s reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unfinished last poem, “The Triumph of Life” (comp. 1822), where he theorises textual afterlife as a kind of “triumphant translation [that] is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death” (pp. 102–3). Although Derrida here privileges translation, critical interpretation is another example of how texts live on by becoming subsumed into new texts. Thus, this present reading, if successful, will enable “The Triumph of Life” to live on as a contribution to a debate on the possibility of an anti-racist, undisciplined Romanticism. “A Triumph of Black Life,” as it were. So, what kind of insight can Shelley’s poetry offer into the workings of racism?

This question is easy for me to ask. In fact, it is suspiciously easy. It is also easy to answer—for instance, like this: “The Triumph of Life” opens at dawn, when its narrator falls into a trance in which he sees a crowd, “Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam, / All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know / Whither he went, or whence he came, or why” (lines 46–8). This is an anonymous mass of people who are all driven by a force, yet no one has a clue why, whence, or whereto. Among this multitude are those who “mournfully within the gloom / Of their own shadow walked, and called it death” (lines 58–9), a living death that is eminently legible as Black life under racial capitalism. As the description picks up pace, we find that some of them “with motions which each other crost / Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw” (lines 62–3). Shadows of people, shadows of clouds, all so intermingled that each individual may—for all they know—be pursuing, or shunning, their

own shadow, or that of anyone else, or that of a cloud. From here we can begin to read these “shadows” as metaphors of African slaves in the Americas. Following Hortense J. Spillers’s ground-breaking analysis of “the dehumanizing, ungendering and defacing” required to turn persons into property (p. 72), Black Studies scholars have adapted the term “fungibility” to describe the status of the enslaved. Legal in its origin, the term denotes the financial logic that makes diverse commodities interchangeable: £10 worth of cotton is equivalent to any other £10 worth of cotton regardless of where and how they were produced, and by whom. “To be fungible, in both its economic and legal meanings, is to have all distinctive characteristics and content hollowed-out,” Shannon Winnubst explains (p. 104). “Each, like himself and like each other were,” as Jean-Jacques Rousseau says of the people in the crowd at a later point in the poem (line 530). By that stage, they are no longer living beings but undead “Phantoms diffused around, and some did fling / Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves” (lines 487–8). At once “like each other” and “yet unlike themselves,” the fungible multitude soon takes on a creaturely aspect: they are described as “eaglets” (line 489), “elves” (line 490), “restless apes” (line 493), “vultures” (line 497), “old anatomies” (line 500), “worms” (line 504), “falcons” (line 506), “like small gnats and flies as thick as mist” (line 508), and also “numerous as the dead leaves blown” (line 528). This word, “numerous,” which is used by both narrator and Rousseau to describe the crowd (line 46, line 528), is the hallmark of fungibility: in it, individuality is absorbed in number.

Another important detail: the hollowing-out is effected by the blindingly white glare emanating from the Chariot of Life, whose “creative ray / Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there / ‘As the sun shapes the clouds[.]’” (lines 533–5). This ray strips people of “the grace / ‘Of life[.]’” (lines 22–3), leaving disfigured and dehumanised phantoms in its wake. The narrator describes its passage as follows:

Yet ere I can say *where* the chariot hath
 Past over them; nor other trace I find
 But as of foam after the Ocean's wrath

Is spent upon the desert shore. (lines 161–4)

So it was for those Africans forced to embark on the Middle Passage. Although there was no singular place *where* or moment *when* they passed from being an individual person to becoming a fungible commodity, by the time they reached the far shore of the Atlantic, the transformation was complete. The bodily aspect of this transformation can be seen in Rousseau's description of the Chariot's effect on the crowd:

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 the eyes where once hope shone
 Desire like a lioness bereft

“Of its last cub, glared ere it died (lines 519–26)

If we regard the Chariot of Life as the juggernaut of white supremacy, the disfiguration of the crowd that it rolls over can be read as an allegory of the ongoing and repetitive disfiguration of Black life by triumphalist racism. Although Shelley would not have been aware of concepts such as “white supremacy” or “Black fungibility,” the above reading—sketchy as it

is—by and large agrees with what appears to have been his intentions with the poem, as well as the scholarly consensus about it: “The Triumph of Life” displays the failures and self-delusions of Western civilization. Since racial oppression is clearly among these, it can be easily slotted into an interpretation of the poem. “A Triumph of Black Life?”—easy question, easy answer.

Let’s make things a bit more difficult. The violence of racism is at its most insidious not on the surface—the physical violence that disfigures and kills—but rather in the very epistemic, social, and political structures that underpin how we live together, what the poem calls “thought’s empire over thought” (line 211). This aspect of the poem’s ideology critique resonates with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s demand that we—as modern citizens, as liberal academics, as moral beings—acknowledge our own complicity with imperialist structures and attempt to unlearn “imperialism’s conceptual apparatus” (p. 43): “Unlearning imperialism attends to the conceptual origins of imperial violence, the violence that presumes people and worlds as raw materials, as always already imperial resources” (p. 8). We could read an instance of unlearning in Rousseau’s partaking of the “crystal glass / Mantling with bright Nepenthe” (lines 358–9) held out by the Shape all Light: “I rose; and, bending at her sweet command, / Touched with faint lips the cup she raised, / And suddenly my brain became as sand[’]” (lines 403–5). Just like that, Rousseau radically unlearns his past. But to what end? What follows is pretty much more of the same: although he calls it “a new Vision never seen before” (line 411), in fact, this vision contains another view of the same triumphal procession of Life that we have been beholding so far. *Et voilà*—“The Triumph of Life” has demonstrated both the need and the impossibility of overthrowing “thought’s empire over thought.” We are all perpetrators in the ongoing violence of racial capitalism, and even anti-racism has become a fungible commodity on the intellectual marketplace—or do you think you can get tenured without a diversity statement?

This brings me to *our own* critical intentions in gesturing towards an anti-racist, undisciplined Romanticism. With what kind of violence are we making Romanticism speak to our present anti-racist agenda? After all, the cultural productions and radical politics of the Romantic era are coeval with an equally radical white supremacism that served to justify genocide and enslavement of people across the globe. As we are forced to come to terms with this “unpleasant” aspect of the Romantic period, I think that, for us as scholars and critics, there is some consolation to be had from ascertaining that, although it was written in a racist epoch, Romantic poetry is not inherently racist—not least because today the accusation of being a racist is often deemed worse than racist behaviour. Thus, rather than asking how to mine Romantic poetry for its anti-racist credentials, I would like us to consider another question. Does our self-therapeutic desire to read proto-anti-racism into the work of Shelley and other Romantic-era authors perpetuate the violation of all the Africans, Asians, Australians, native Americans, and other indigenous peoples who were brutally raped, enslaved, and murdered by Europeans in the Romantic period?—That is, while Shelley was writing poems in Italy.

To answer that question, we need to articulate the connection between the interpretative violence of an anti-racist reading of Romantic poetry and the actual violence against Black bodies in the Romantic period and in our own present. After the Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the world last summer, many universities and other institutions hurried to proclaim their solidarity. Suddenly, confessional books on everyday racism by Black authors were topping the best-seller charts. Reflecting on this surge of interest in anti-racism, Saidiya Hartman made the following observation in an interview with Catherine Damman:

What we see now is a translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy. In this extreme moment, the casual violence that can result in a loss of life—a police officer

literally killing a Black man with the weight of his knees on the other's neck— becomes a flash point for a certain kind of white liberal conscience, like: “Oh my god! We're living in a racist order! How can I find out more about this?” (n. pag.)

This special issue of the *Keats-Shelley Journal* and the online roundtable hosted by the Keats-Shelley Association of America that preceded it are both part of this translation of Black suffering into white pedagogy. So, when I ask about the violence with which we would wish for Romantic texts to speak to our own anti-racist commitments, I am not primarily thinking about the metaphorical violence of a misinterpretation or a misreading, but the literal violence wielded by the state against Black bodies. A violence that is part of the ongoing, living legacy of colonialism and the slave trade.

This is why I want to sound a note of caution about the ease with which we adapt the rhetoric of “undisciplining.” The word “undisciplined” enters the present conversation via an editorial by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (n. pag.), where it is a citation from Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). Sharpe addresses the continuities between Black being in slavery and being Black in America today, the key argument being that Black Americans exist in the wake of the slave ship. In the relevant paragraph, she specifically addresses Black scholars:

That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday ... We are expected to discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and measure those ways of knowing and to enact epistemic violence that we know to be violence against others and ourselves. In other words, for Black academics to produce legible work in the academy often means ... doing violence to our own capacities to read, think, and imagine otherwise. Despite

knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter (1994, 70) has called our “narratively condemned status.” We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the “racial calculus ... that [was] entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live[s on] into the present. (pp. 12–13)

As Sharpe uses it, “becoming undisciplined” is a way of acknowledging Black ways of knowing that cannot be contained by the white academy. Unlearning academic discipline is a way of tapping into the living tradition and heritage of Black communities. This opposition between Black modes of knowing and academic disciplines is there at the foundation of the modern research university, which of course coincided with the height of the transatlantic slave trade. This entailed the development of new professional standards for research, focused on the ideal of “objectivity” and “scientific method,” concepts that turned the experience of white, financially privileged, predominantly male subjects into the universal measure of knowledge. For this reason, I worry that we are all-to-easily assimilating Sharpe’s call for Black scholars to “become undisciplined” to an (in itself rather Romantic) rebellious aesthetic without thinking through the epistemic foundations of the work that we do. That entails acknowledging the extent to which we, in our capacity as academics, are perpetuating the notion of white European intellectual superiority that has profoundly shaped the development of the modern university. This brings me to my final question. In what sense is the scholarship on British Romanticism—and the discipline of English more widely—located in the wake of British Romanticism?

In the wake of Shelley’s final journey on the *Ariel/Don Juan*? When I first encountered it, British Romanticism was a movement that ended with three deaths: John

Keats, Lord Byron, and Shelley. In this trio of dead white men, Shelley's corpse has proved the most troublesome; the most mythopoeic. Take, for instance, the conclusion of Paul de Man's reading of "The Triumph of Life" in "Shelley Disfigured":

The poem is sheltered from the performance of disfiguration by the power of its negative knowledge. But this knowledge is powerless to prevent what now functions as the decisive textual articulation: its reduction to the status of a fragment brought about by the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici. This defaced body is present in the margin of the last manuscript page and has become an inseparable part of the poem. (pp. 66–7)

Shelley's death functions as the poem's "decisive textual articulation" even though it is obviously unrelated to the "negative knowledge" operative in the poem itself. Of course, as de Man notes, "The Triumph of Life" is a fragment because Shelley died before finishing it, and in that sense his death determines the form of the poem. One could furthermore argue that Shelley's death has itself, in the form of biographical myth, become a textual event: since any informed reader is likely to be aware of "The Triumph of Life" being Shelley's last work, the story of his death takes on a paratextual status. However, de Man's argument distinctly emphasises the physical remains—he refers to "the actual death *and* subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body" (p. 66, emphasis added). The passage is rhetorically forceful, but what exactly is Shelley's disfigured corpse doing in the margin of the last page?

For one, its disfigured appearance dovetails with the rhetorical disfiguration that de Man analyzes. This linguistic coincidence (the two meanings of the word "disfigured") represents how easy it is to pass from historical fact to rhetorical trope and back. Words make reality and imagination fungible. In this way, historical accidents outside the text can gain entrance into even the most aesthetic and ahistorical interpretation (such as de Manian

rhetorical reading): “The final test of reading, in *The Triumph of Life*, depends on how one reads the textuality of this event, how one disposes of Shelley’s body,” de Man writes, immediately adding that this “challenge” is “in fact present in all texts” (p. 67):

For what we have done with the dead Shelley, and with the other dead bodies that appear in romantic literature ... is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves. ... They have been transformed into historical and aesthetic objects. (p. 67)

So much for the bodies that *appear* in Romantic literature—but what of those who are absent? M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2011) is becoming the canonical example of giving voice to those thousands of Africans who died crossing the Atlantic, if not drowned in its waves, then legally dead as they arrived on the other side as chattel. The poem—elegy or incantation—commemorates the case of the *Zong*, a slave ship whose captain, having become lost at sea, decided to throw 150 Africans overboard to claim insurance for lost cargo. Back in Britain, the insurers refused to pay out. The poem is made up only of words contained in a report on the court case that ensued. Here, too, the margin is littered with drowned bodies. Philip faces the threat of turning these into aesthetic objects by fracturing the words—breaking language down into its elements, letting them sink down into the depths of the page. “*The ones I like the best*,” Philip wrote in her working journal, “*are those where the poem escapes the net of complete understanding—where the poem is shot through with glimmers of meaning*” (p. 192). Glimmers of meaning “[a]s clear as when a veil of light is drawn / O’er evening hills they glimmer” (lines 32–3). This glimmering veil is the surface onto which the vision of “*The Triumph of Life*” is projected. Words are devious like this: they connect the radically disparate in a glimmer.

This is why the question of “*A Triumph of Black Life?*” is so easy to ask and answer. Not only does it remain within the knowledge paradigm of our discipline—according to

which writing produced by white men is universally applicable and can live on in any other text—but it also hinges on the fungibility of words that facilitates the easy transition between real and imagined dead bodies. What I do not know how to ask is the more difficult question of how we could use this language that we've inherited to learn to know otherwise.

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