

This writing sample is the conclusion of my dissertation’s first chapter on Shelley (and the second overall). It is preceded by an analysis of solitude and the ironic critique of Orientalism in 1816’s Alastor, and a brief reading of Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise, which Shelley translated. The subsequent chapter interprets the far more overly political Revolt of Islam (1818) in terms of the rubric of solitude and “Oriental” Despotism established, via close readings of Montesquieu and Rousseau, in the dissertation’s introduction. This essay has been accepted for publication in The Keats-Shelley Journal in 2010. ~AW

“Unentangled Intermixture”: Love and Materialism in Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*

We all know that no one would refuse such an offer, but would at once feel that this was what he had ever sought; and intimately to mix and melt and to be melted together with his beloved, so that one should be made out of two. The cause of this desire is, that according to our original nature, we were once entire.

—Plato, *The Symposium*, Shelley’s translation (1818)¹

*One hope within two wills, one will beneath
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,
And one annihilation. Woe is me!
The winged words on which my soul would pierce
Into the height of Love’s rare Universe,
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire --
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!*
—Shelley, *Epipsychidion* (1821)²

I. Sister of the Orphan One

Shelley was not the only thinker of his time deeply critical of over-arching conceptions of unity, be they philosophical, political, or amorous. Such criticisms raised against the One were, either overtly or more latently, slowly becoming a staple of so-called liberal thought during Shelley’s lifetime. The very idea of a British and Irish “Union” from 1800 on began to redefine how British liberals such as Byron and Coleridge thought of British imperialism. Byron’s 1812

¹ See Shelley’s *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, Vol. I, ed. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (London: Evans and Bradbury, 1852), 90-1.

² *Epipsychidion* (ll. 584-91), in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002). All references to Shelley’s poetry and prose come from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

“Roman Catholic Claims Speech” given to the House of Lords in defense of Irish emancipation, for instance, gives a particularly pointed example of this change in rhetoric: “If it must be called a Union, it is the union of the shark with his prey, the spoiler swallows up his victim, and thus they become indivisible. Thus has Great Britain swallowed up the parliament, the constitution, the independence of Ireland.”³ This skepticism towards unquestioned unity brought about by an open debate over colonialism, and enflamed by a more general Romantic interest in unity more generally, lent a particular spirit to liberal thought in Shelley’s time. And indeed, we should not forget that Shelley himself cut his political and intellectual teeth on the Irish question with his anti-Union distribution of “An Address to the Irish People” in late 1811 and early 1812.

For a clear articulation of this spirit of distrust of British monarchic authority we might turn to William Hazlitt’s 1823 “On the Spirit of Monarchy,” published in Shelley, Byron and Leigh Hunt’s soon to be defunct journal *The Liberal*, dispatched from Italy to evade British censorship. The essay, never republished by Hazlitt, begins with a curiously Shelleyan turn of phrase: “The Spirit of Monarchy, then, is nothing but the craving in the human mind after the Sensible and the One.”⁴ Leaving aside the essay’s mocking epigraphs, it is unclear whether Monarchy here is a good, bad or neutral thing, just as it is unclear to what “the One” exactly refers. It clearly is some sort of reference to the *mono* in *Monarchy* (in Greek, “rule of the one”) as pitted against something like what Hazlitt in the slightly earlier “What is the People” (1818) calls “the People... millions of men, like you, with hearts beating in the bosoms, with thoughts stirring in their minds, with blood stirring in their veins... and a will to be free.”⁵

³ Quoted in Ina Ferris’ *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2002), 4. Indeed, the British and Irish Union was often rhetorically posed in terms of a wedding (between a cultured British gentleman and a “wild Irish girl”), and therefore in the early 19th century the term *union* often took on something of a negative connotation in more progressive circles.

⁴ Hazlitt, William. “The Spirit of Monarchy” in *On the Pleasure of Hating* (Penguin: NY, 2005), 47.

⁵ See “What is the People,” March 7, 1818, in *On the Pleasure of Hating*, 67.

But could this multiple freedom somehow be actualized through “the Sensible and the One”? What follows in “The Spirit of Monarchy” emphatically denies the efficacy or healthfulness of any such Hobbesian compromise: “It is not so much a matter of state-necessity or policy, as a natural infirmity, a disease, a false appetite in the popular feeling, which must be gratified. Man is an individual animal with narrow faculties, but infinite desires, which he is anxious to concentrate in some one object within the grasp of his imagination.”⁶ Such a characterization clearly echoes the preface to Shelley’s 1815 *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude* in which the Poet and Visionary’s prime fault is attaching all of his hope and thought and desire “to a single image.” Indeed, in Hazlitt’s essay man’s failure is precisely a narcissism which creates a mirror, such as a king, wherein “if he cannot be all that he wishes himself, he may at least contemplate his own pride, vanity, and passions.” True liberalism, consequently, is nothing “but that which looks out of itself to others.”⁷ In this way Shelley’s deep concern for the tyranny of the Image and the One is not all that different from the liberal discourse of his day. Where Shelley differs from these other thinkers is simply in the degree to and tenacity with which he pursues this urge towards the One—he makes it not merely into an empirical or psychological principle common to human beings, like Hazlitt, but rather makes it into a (false) metaphysical category, like Coleridge. Indeed, Shelley conjoins these two modes of thought—the political imperative *against* the One, and a rigorous Coleridgean investigation *of* the One—and consequently finds the terror of the One in everything: in politics; in colonialism and treatments of the Orient; in writing; in love; and, in *Epipsychidion*, in himself.

Epipsychidion (1821) is simultaneously a rewriting and an auto-critique of his oeuvre to that point, centered around the primary themes of *Alastor*. What is significant in Shelley’s critique of

⁶ “The Spirit of Monarchy,” 47. Here we might also call to mind a linguistic distinction between Hobbes’ unified “People” and the more internally differentiated “Multitude” of Spinoza, Volney or Shelley. In Canto XI of *The Revolt of Islam*, for example, we see that each individual in the “multitude, [was] alone and lost / To sense of outward things” (XI, ll. 4306-7). Here the multitude is differentiated at the level of the individual. For the best scholarly edition of *The Revolt*, see Jack Donovan’s version in *The Poems of Shelley, 1817-1819, Volume II*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 2000).

⁷ “On the Spirit of Monarchy,” 64.

the Poet of *Alastor* who tragically cannot get outside of himself—a clear stand-in for Shelley in his weaker moments⁸—is the distinctive shift in poetic tone and genre. If, in the tradition of Southey and Byron, *Alastor* was principally an ironic “epic” demonstration of the futility of uncritical Orientalism and solipsism, then *Epipsychidion* is an explicitly metaphysical and lyric investigation of the unconquerable impulse towards and violent futility of Romantic Unity and the *One*. The word itself recurs dozens⁹ of times at key points throughout the poem, and begins in the opening invocation of Emily as the “Sweet Sprit! Sister of that orphan one” (l. 1). This mysterious One, who in *Alastor* turns out to be a demonic seductress fashioned from his own dreams (literally an *alastor*), in this poem becomes Emily, a poeticized version of Teresa Viviani, a young girl Shelley attempted to rescue from a tyrannical father in 1820. And yet the true threat no longer comes from the One (that is from outside, from the tyrannical father), but from Shelley’s own poetic persona overtaking another human being, and thus annihilating himself. In this way the stakes in *Epipsychidion* are higher than they are in the earlier *Alastor* because in the later poem there are *two* lives at stake rather than simply that of the solitary poet. Indeed, a great deal of the poem describes the poet’s wish to transport himself and Emily to the solitude of an idealized and Orientalized Greek island¹⁰ where they might unite: “To the intense, the deep, the imperishable, / Not mine but me, henceforth be thou united / Even as a bride, delighting and delighted” (ll. 391-3). Thus the

⁸ In a chapter entitled “The Unreserve of Mingled Being,” Teddi Chichester Bonca argues that “the ‘solitariness and desolation of heart’ that Shelley experienced in late October and early November of 1814 significantly colored the tale of sexual discovery [i.e., *Alastor*] he composed a year later.” *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love: Narcissism, Sacrifice and Sorority* (State University of New York Press: New York, 1999), 172-3.

⁹ For example: “There—One, whose voice as venom’d melody” (l. 256); “In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought. / And some were fair—but beauty dies away: / Others were wise—but honeyed words betray: / And One was true—oh! why not true to me?” (ll. 267-71); “One stood on my path who seemed / As like the glorious shape which I had dreamed” (l. 276-7); “Soft as an Incarnation of the Sun, / When light is changed to love, this glorious One / Floated into the cavern where I lay...” (ll. 335-7).

¹⁰ Jennifer Wallace points out this crucial fact, though her reading of Emily as divided between a westernized, identifiable companion and an “Orientalized” eastern portal to the Infinite perhaps relies a bit too heavily on one or two key descriptions of the island. See *Shelley and Greece* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 119-47.

Sisyphian task the poem sets us to is to maintain plurality in the face of the recursive and self-generating (“delighted and delighting”) will to fuse and unify.¹¹

In this way *Epipsychidion* is the obverse of *The Cenci* (1819), written about a year and a half earlier. *The Cenci* stages the drama of violent narcissism from an external position, in which Beatrice, daughter of the Count Cenci, must somehow—perhaps impossibly—resist the overwhelming expansion of her father’s ego, to resist becoming an agent and image of that violent will. Her task, in other words, is to maintain her own (moral, spiritual) difference in spite of her father’s violent attempts to engender in her his own self-replicating, other-annihilating will, most horrifically through rape. In the end, and this is what makes the play a tragedy, Beatrice herself resorts to violence when she commissions a young man to kill her father. Like Byron’s spoiler swallowing up its victim to create an indivisible union, violence here becomes the currency of the One, as does everything else in the tragedy. As in *Epipsychidion*, that charged term—*One*—is used throughout the play, and is inaugurated in the play’s Preface:

Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.¹²

This “one tremendous end,” which eerily unifies the tragedy, is not merely death (which it also is in *Epipsychidion*), but more importantly it is the impulse and path towards an impossible, violent

¹¹ Thus my reading contradicts one such as Stuart Peterfreund’s, who argues that “The speaker proposes love as going out of oneself, of seeking the One through the many, as a way of transcending mortality and overcoming materiality.” The problem with Peterfreund’s reading is that *Epipsychidion* so clearly points to both the impossibility of “overcoming materiality” or *ever* finding the One through many, though Peterfreund hints that such a thing might be possible after “this life.” But such a quest is not merely doomed from the start, but ethically problematic. “The One” might trigger this escape from the self, but it is also what calls us back to the self, and thus our ethical (and political) duty is to lose both the self *and* the impossible desire for unity. See *Shelley Among Others: The Play of the Intertext and the Idea of Language* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 281-5.

¹² See *The Poems of Shelley, 1817-1819, Volume II*, 728 (ll. 24-8).

unity.¹³ The Preface thereby anticipates one of *Epipsychidion*’s key anxieties: the need to know whether poetic craft itself is anything more than a kind of solipsistic play.¹⁴

Epipsychidion is an advance on *The Cenci* not so much with regards to its central themes and questions, but rather in terms of the point from which these questions are asked. The poem, which Harold Bloom aptly calls “a kind of extended or narrative lyric,”¹⁵ poses the central problem of *The Cenci*—of the propagation of violence, of difference, of the One and the Many, of narcissism—from the perspective of love, rather than from that of hatred. In doing so *Epipsychidion* threatens the very core of Shelley’s political project which, in both *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound*, is founded precisely upon love. And Shelley’s conception of love, we shall see, is inextricably entangled with his deep investment in materialism. Indeed, it is a sort of Lucretian materialism, coupled with a critique of Romantic Unity, that pushes love to its crisis in *Epipsychidion*.¹⁶ The poem’s desire to create an “unentangled intermixture” (ll. 93-4) of the souls of the Poet and Emily fails, and the failure, communicated as it is within the language of atoms (l. 479, 505) and “intermixing” (l. 565) and “twining” (l. 501) and things “interknit” (l. 500), is a distinctly Lucretian one.

II. Here the Soul Is Broken: Love in Lucretius’ Materialism

¹³ After Giacomo says “That word parricide... haunts me like fear,” Orsino responds: “Mark, how wisest God / Draws to one point the threads of a just doom, / So sanctifying it: what you devise / Is, as it were, accomplished” (*The Cenci*, Act III, scene 1, ll. 340-6). In this way even the murder of the evil Count Cenci feeds into the voracity of the One.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of the poem’s uncomfortable poetics, see Karen Weisman’s *Imageless Truths: Shelley’s Poetic Fictions* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1994), which suggests that the poem contains such an “egregious transparency” that it might escape from the “charge of real solipsism,” 114.

¹⁵ See *Shelley’s Mythmaking* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959), 208.

¹⁶ In a suggestive moment Stuart Sperry suggests that “The fact is that language, even the symbolic language of verse, depends ultimately on nature, and can only approach those idealizations conceived within the self.” He does not follow this assertion through, and perhaps my reading argues that it is precisely the materialist language of Lucretius that limits those “idealizations.” See *Shelley Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 180.

In his foundational *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Earl Wasserman calls *Epipsychidion* “both a poem about the soul,” as its title would suggest,¹⁷ and also “as nearly a song about a marriage as the subject of the human union with spiritual perfection will permit.”¹⁸ This is a nice formulation, tying together as it does the poem’s linking of “union” and marriage and “spiritual perfection.” But the problem with Wasserman’s reading, which is arguably the strongest reading of the poem to date, is that his examination of *Epipsychidion*’s “dialectic of love as total union” neglects Shelley’s materialism in favor of his more overtly spiritual Platonism.¹⁹ While it is true that Shelley translated (and invisibly revised) Plato’s treatise on love in 1818, and that Plato remained one of the touchstones of Shelley’s thought throughout his career, Wasserman’s argument leaves to one side Shelley’s key philosophical influence—that is, skepticism, as it was passed down from ancient thinkers like Epicurus and Lucretius, or more contemporary ones like Hume, Drummond, and Lucretius’ 1805 translator and commentator, John Mason Good, whose edition Shelley owned and studied extensively.²⁰ Or, more precisely, Wasserman overlooks the way in which Shelley translates a theory of love inherited from Plato into the more skeptical, materialist language of Lucretius.

Before Shelley even had a time to translate and update *The Symposium*, though, Plato’s version of love²¹ had already been updated by the post-Kantians, and it is with them that we shall

¹⁷ The critical consensus has is that *Epi-psychidion* does not refer to the “soul within a soul” of the fragmentary *On Love* (503), but merely calls itself “On the Subject of the Soul.” See Wasserman’s *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 418-19, and James Notopoulos’ *The Platonism of Shelley* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 278-81.

¹⁸ See Wasserman’s *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 419.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 445.

²⁰ On the topic of Shelley’s complicated debt to Lucretius’ dissident editors and translators, Michael Vicario’s *Shelley’s Intellectual System and Its Epicurean Background* (London: Routledge, 2007), is indispensable.

²¹ Shelley’s translation of *The Symposium* emphasizes the union of lovers that Schelling’s formulation will as will. “the soul of each manifestly thirsts for, from the other, something which there are no words to describe, and divines that which it seeks, and traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire. If Vulcan should say to persons thus affected, 'My good people, what is it that you want with one another ? ' And if, while they were hesitating what to answer, he should proceed to ask, 'Do you not desire the closest union and singleness to exist between you, so that you may never be divided night or day? If so, I will melt you together, and make you grow into one, so that both in life and death ye may be undivided. Consider, is this what you desire? Will it content you if you become that which I propose?’

begin.²² A standard account of the Romantic notion of love that *Epipsychidion* critiques can be found in Schelling, whose thought Shelley knew at least indirectly through Coleridge’s plagiarisms in his *Biographia Literaria* and Madame de Staël’s summaries in her *Germany*. In his *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* (1809) we see perhaps the most sophisticated thinking-through of this “Romantic” notion of union. For Schelling love (“and life and personal existence”)²³ exists only on account of a primordial self-division of what he calls *the groundless* (*der Ungrund*, also translated as *void* or *abyss*)²⁴ into two separate, “eternal beginnings.” Because there cannot be antithetical difference *within* the groundless because the groundless is pure positive willing, the groundless separates itself into “the whole in each” of the distinct entities which “could each exist in itself.” The “secret of love,” however, is that these distinct entities cannot in fact “be without the [existence of the] other,” though they can freely unite in love. But what exactly is being united in Schelling’s description of love? It is not, as one might assume, lovers, which is to say, flesh and blood human beings. Rather “love... combines the existent (ideal) with the basis of existence” so that “all is subordinated into spirit,” and, we might add, will, the

We all know that no one would refuse such an offer, but would at once feel that this was what he had ever sought; and intimately to mix and melt and to be melted together with his beloved, so that one should be made out of two. The cause of this desire is, that according to our original nature, we were once entire.” See *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, 90-1.

²² Thomas Pfau, among others, has convincingly argued that Shelley was very much aware of the Kantian revolution, and that Shelley’s notion of the self—and I would argue, his notion of love—should be conceived with the transcendental ego, as it were, in mind. See “Tropes of Desire: Figuring the ‘insufficient void’ of Self-Consciousness in Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*.” *Keats-Shelley Journal* XL (1991): 99-126.

²³ See FWJ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, tr. James Gutmann (La Salle: Open Court, 1936), 89.

²⁴ At its most basic level, the groundless [*Ungrund*] is simply that which has no prior cause or foundation. A reason for not translating *der Ungrund* as *void*, though, would be that, unlike Lucretius’ void, Schelling’s *Ungrund* wills, even if it wills nothing. As Žižek argues, “prior to *Grund* [ground], there can only be an abyss [*Ungrund*]—that is to say, far from being a mere *nihil privativum*, this ‘nothing’ which precedes Ground stands for the ‘absolute indifference’ *qua* the abyss of pure Freedom which is not yet the predicate property of some Subject but, rather, designates a pure impersonal Willing [*Wollen*], which wills nothing... Schellings premise here is radically ‘anthropcentric’: man is not a mere epiphenomenon in the universe, a negligible grain of dust—among all created things, he is the only one to possess the ‘power of the centre,’ and stands as such in direct contact with the abyss of primordial freedom.” In Lucretius’ universe man *is* a speck, and the void certainly does not will, even if it does produce material effects. For the quotation, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: an Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), 14.

essence of humanity.²⁵ Once this combination takes place, the original bifurcation of the groundless into two eternal beginnings “dissolves as in man, when he is converted to clarity and establishes himself as an enduring being, the initial longing is dissolved, in that all that is true and good in it is elevated into clear consciousness, while all the rest, namely what is false and impure, is eternally sealed in darkness to remain as the eternally dark depths of selfhood.”²⁶ This vision is precisely the intensely ironized dream of *Alastor*, wherein the Poet attempts to eschew his impure body (his “human wants”) and thinks he discovers a disembodied, purely spiritual love. The irony, of course, is that Schelling’s “dark depths of selfhood” turn out to be, for the Poet, precisely that disembodied spirit (the *alastor*) he so ardently sought. Hence this equation of Romantic unity, $1+1=1$, contains within it two logics: a) the dream of a lost unity wherein the singular entities on the left side (re)unite into something like Schelling’s notion of the groundless; and also b) the cutting irony that Romantic love seeks, like Augustine’s recursive *amans amare*²⁷ or *The Cenci*’s “one tremendous end,” only itself. Each of the equation’s *one*’s designates the same violent ego, and it is precisely that impulse towards the One that *Epipsychidion* critiques in the language of Lucretian materialism.²⁸

²⁵ *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ The phrase comes from *Alastor*’s epigraph, from St. Augustine’s *Confessions: Nondum amabam et amare, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare* (“Not yet did I love, yet I was in love with loving... I sought what I might love, loving to love”). Donald Reiman and Daniel Fraistat, in their edition of Shelley’s poems, point out that Shelley had also used this quote in the Advertisement for the “Poems to Mary” of 1810, as well as “in a notebook that Claire Claremont used for her journal in 1814” (74). In other words, it seems clear that Augustine, and his account of love in particular, was in Shelley’s mind for an extended period of time. See *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 74.

²⁸ A good place to look for an analysis of the Lucretian void as it relates to love is in the work of Alain Badiou. The difference between the Badiouian or Lucretian *void* and the Schellingian *groundless* lies in the fact that the void is not unified. In other words, while the groundless is simply another name for the Parmenidian One, the void is precisely the *not One*, which is to say that it is that which resists undifferentiated Unity in all forms. The most personal access which we have to the void, posited as the *not One*, is love: “Love is the only experience we have of a Two counted as itself, of an immanent Two.” See “La Scène du Deux” in Badiou, Dragonetti, Grosrichard *et al*, *De l’amour* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 8.

All that exists in the universe, for Lucretius, are matter and void, and so love becomes an “unnecessary need” for him, a sort of sickness or madness rather than a transcendent communication between souls. Good’s evocative translation poses this union as such:

So he who feels the shaft of love propell'd
From the dear form that charms him, tow'rds the spot
Aims, whence the wound proceeds; supreme he pants
To join the contest, and from frame to frame
Pour the rich humour; for the fierce desire,
Now felt, assures how vast the bliss to come.
This, this is Venus: this he deems true love;
Hence flow the drops delicious that the heart
Erode hereafter, and its train of cares.
For, though the form adored be absent, still
Her phantoms haunt the lover, and his ear
Sings with her name, whate'er the path pursued.
Yet fly such phantoms, from the food of love
Abstain, libidinous; to worthier themes
Turn, turn thy spirit; let the race at large
Thy liberal heart divide, nor lavish, gross,
O'er one fond object thy exhausted strength,
Gend'ring long cares, and certain grief at last.
For love's deep ulcer fed, grows deeper still,

Rank, and more pois'nous.²⁹

One could go far in disentangling the gendered nuances of this description (that, for instance, it is an thoroughly “masculine” theory of love, and yet it is the men who are pierced “by the shaft of love”), but what is important is the way in which love is depicted as something that must be given a temporary, rather than eternal, fix. Love is a symptom of physical need that can drive you mad, and the best way to avoid madness is through promiscuity.³⁰ Just as the *Alastor* Poet’s downfall comes from fixing his hopes and desires to “a single image,” Lucretius’ heartsick lover should not “lavish, gross, / O’er one fond object thy exhausted strength.” If one’s heart should be “divided,” it should happen on account of “the race at large”—i.e., socially rather than amorously.

But for Lucretius, love is not merely a material sickness—it is also logically incoherent. Because Venus’ “phantoms haunt lovers,” love is based upon the false premise that two lovers might somehow spiritually unite, an idea that Lucretius mockingly literalizes: “body clings greedily to body; they mingle the saliva of their mouths pressing them with their teeth. But all to no purpose. One can remove nothing from the other by rubbing, nor enter right in and be wholly absorbed, body in body... In aimless bewilderment they rot away, stricken by a *secret* sore.”³¹ He calls it a *volnere caeco*, that is by / through / from an unseen and blind wound. Love tricks lovers through images, and for Lucretius, images are not composed of light bouncing off objects. Rather,

²⁹ *Lucretius, On the Nature of Things; a Didactic Poem*, Vol. II, tr. John Mason Good (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1805), Book IV ll. 1049-68. Or, in more modern translation: “When a man is pierced by the shafts of Venus... he strives towards the source of the wound and craves to be united with it and to ejaculate fluid out of his body and into that body... This, then, is what we term Venus [*Haec Venus est nobis*]. This is the origin of the thing called love... Though the object of your love be absent, images of it still haunt you... you should keep well away from such images... Ejaculate the build-up of seed promiscuously and do not hold on to it.” See *On the Nature of the Universe*, tr. R.E. Latham (New York: Penguin, 1994), 122.

³⁰ Here one might think of Byron’s letter to Shelley where he claimed it was “impossible” for him to leave Venice because, to paraphrase a little, “What happened in Venice, stayed in Venice.”

³¹ See Latham’s translation of *On the Nature of the Universe*, 124. Good’s tamer version runs: “In amorous fold he press her, lip to lip / Join, and drink deep the dulcet breath she heaves, / ‘Tis useless all ; for still his utmost rage / Can nought subtract ; nor through the fair one force His total frame, commingled with herself. / Yet oft thus strives he, or thus seems to strive; / So strong the toils that bind him ; so complete / Melt all his members in the sea of love. / And though, when now the full-collected shock / Pours from the nerves, some transient pause ensue, / Yet short its period ; the fond fever soon, / The frenzy quick returns, and the mad wretch / Still pants to press that which he press'd before; / Nor aught of antidote exists, so deep / Pines he, perplexed, beneath the latent ill” (IV ll. 1104-18).

images are composed of a particular species of atom that objects and bodies are continuously sloughing off. These composites, what Lucretius calls simulacra, are constantly flying through the air, and our brains can perceive them through the eye; or, when in a weakened state such as sleep, the brain can also “absorb” them. This is why we can dream of something unreal, like a unicorn: a phantom composite of a horse floats into our brain at the same time as the simulacrum of a horn or wings, and then, suddenly, the image of a unicorn appears in your head, literally so. The simulacrum of a unicorn is *actually* in your head, just like the image of your lover is *actually* within you disturbing your sleep. The problem is that the atoms of real flesh and blood bodies (or material souls) cannot intermingle in such a way, but the madness of love makes you think that they could because you have become fixated on one thing. Love is a bodily need like hunger or thirst in that it is a demand to fill a void, but it is an incoherent demand in that it is unclear exactly *what* void is being filled, or even *what* you’re trying to fill it with, because that void is both blind and unseen (a *volnere caeco*). The juxtaposition of Juan’s profession of eternal love with his involuntary retching in Canto II of Byron’s comedy is the perfect satiric counterpoint to the irrational demands of love: what is needed is not to fill a void, but to evacuate one.³²

Such a notion of the loving, desiring subject fundamentally contradicts, *avant la lettre*, the Cartesian or Leibnizian view of the mind which locates it in a particular place in the body. In Book III of *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius begins by assuming a “Greek” approach to the problem (that the mind/soul springs from a pure harmony of the body), which he then contradicts:

The mental sense no part specific frames,

But springs the vital product of the whole.

³² "And, oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear -- / But that's impossible, and cannot be -- / Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air, / Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea, / Than I resign thine image, oh, my fair! / Or think of any thing excepting thee; / A mind diseased no remedy can physic / (Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick). // Sooner shall heaven kiss earth (here he fell sicker), / Oh, Julia! what is every other woe? / (For God's sake let me have a glass of liquor; / Pedro, Battista, help me down below.) / Julia, my love! (you rascal, Pedro, quicker) -- / Oh, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so) -- / Belovéd Julia, hear me still beseeching!" / (Here he grew inarticulate with retching.)" See Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. T.G. Steffan (New York: Penguin, 1988), Canto II. 20.

This the GREEK schools term HARMONY—a sense
Of living power while still th’ essential soul
No point appropriates—as corporeal health
Flows not from sections but the form entire.³³

His contradiction, however, has more to do with the notion of harmony than with the dispersion of the soul throughout the body. For Lucretius mind (*anima*) and soul (*animus*) are one and the same thing (ll. 136-7), without a centralized location (but also not acting from the Greek notion of harmony), just health is not a “part” of a healthy man (ll. 102-3). They are, rather, dispersed throughout the body in the form of different sorts of “seeds of matter, most minute and smooth,” in Good’s translation.³⁴ Or, more exactly, they are “infinitesimal atoms” as Copley’s 1977 version puts it—(and from here on, I will employ his more precise translation, only referring to Good’s where appropriate).³⁵ These “infinitesimal atoms” possess a particular nature and differ in kind from the atoms which make up the rest of the body. They are “elements of the soul... / mixed and arranged to give them power” (ll. 258-59) so that they combine in such a way that “they’re like one thing with many characteristics” (l. 265), a “single complex” (l. 268; Good: “one joint frame,” l. 275). Wind (“the unseen power,” *vis*), and air, and heat “must show a corporate power in our bodies / ... / so that they all three seem to become just one” (ll. 283, 285). Like Shelley, Lucretius never declares that these atoms or elements build up to create one singular thing;³⁶ rather, the union is always posed in terms of a simile, a *like* or a *seem*. Indeed, Lucretius even goes so far as to warn

³³ See Good’s *On the Nature of Things*, III ll. 105-10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III l. 180.

³⁵ See *The Nature of Things*, tr. Frank O. Copley (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

³⁶ He does at one point declare the mind and soul to be “joined / together, and form one single entity” (III.136-7), however it might be argued that this rhetoric is directed more to prove his point that there is no difference between the soul and mind than to prove that they are a single, unified entity. In any case, the pains he takes after this point to stress the *likeness* of the system of elements to a unified thing demonstrates a clear skepticism concerning it. Alternatively, we might recall a distinction that Badiou makes between *the One* and the subjective act of *counting-as-one*, wherein a subject actively (or a state of affairs, passively) chooses to interpret the effects of the void in such a way as to (tentatively) name certain aspects as though they were entities. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, tr. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006), 24.

the reader that the effects such as thought and life caused by the intermixing of atoms cannot properly be described because the “poverty of [his] native tongue forbids it” (l. 260). As it were, language reifies the effects of matter in such a way that we begin mistaking effects for matter, and matter for effects. Language creates an image where there is merely an unstable pattern, and what is at stake in Lucretius’ materialism is not simply an account of the world, but the afterlife of the soul as well. If the soul is simply a temporary (if not *entirely* random) pattern or complex of elements, then it can only exist within a narrow band of contexts and circumstances, and much of Book III is devoted to examining not merely how souls work, but also how they break, the same task as *Epipsychidion*.³⁷

Lucretius’ account of the union of soul / mind and body functions in a nearly identical manner as that of the soul alone, but with different elements and consequently different effects: the elements of the body are “heavier” than the elements of the soul, and the body is subject to health and illness in a way distinct from the soul. Nevertheless, there is not a strict distinction between the two; they function in tandem to create a “living power of body and soul” (l. 558).³⁸ They are, in their effects, interdependent because “without the body, the soul cannot alone / of itself produce life-movements, nor the body, / stripped of the soul, survive or have sensation” (ll. 560-2): “A single life links soul and body” (l. 579). This *single life (conjuncta est causa duobus)*,³⁹ or “One in themselves” in Good’s translation), however, is not a thing, but rather an effect produced by things. In Lucretius’ system the slightest change can throw the system out of balance, and if that happens

³⁷ In describing a slow death, Lucretius argues that “Since, here, the soul is broken, and comes out / not whole nor all at once, it must be mortal. / Now if you think the soul might, through the limbs, / draw inward and contract its parts to one, / thus taking sentience from our total being, / but then that spot, where all that mass of soul / was pressed, should have, it seems, much heightened sentience. / But that “spot” doesn’t exist, for, as I showed, / the soul, torn up and scattered abroad, has died” (531-9).

³⁸ Or in Good’s 1805 translation: “The vital pow’r, moreo’er, of each subsists / Alone conjoint, for mutual is their life” (567-8).

³⁹ Literally *the cause / problem / principle is conjoined for the two [soul and body]*. *Causa*, a variant spelling of *causa*, can refer to a metaphysical principle, a practical cause, a legal cause, or even a medical complication—it would seem that Lucretius is likely playing on all of these associations in his rather odd phrasing. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1982).

then the excess effect produced by the system (i.e. life) disappears, and the aggregates disentwine severing “our link with the self” (l. 851).

III. Unentangled Intermixtures: but Wherefore Two?

The curious thing about Lucretius’ cynical, material theory of love is that it shares so much with Shelley’s idealization of love. This is problematic because a) Lucretius is arguably *the* key philosophical touchstone for Shelley, a lifelong skeptic and atheist; and b) Shelley’s ethics, politics and poetics are founded upon a notion of love that fundamentally contradicts that of Lucretius. And yet, Shelley’s notion of love is almost always posed within a Lucretian framework, most obviously in what has become Shelley’s “standard” definition, from the fragmentary essay “On Love,” a definition well worth repeating here: love is that “powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves.”⁴⁰ This “chasm of an insufficient void” is inarguably Lucretian.

Shelley goes on to break this vague “experience” down into the three categories of reason, imagination, and feeling:

If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood. This is Love.⁴¹

The final assertion (“This is Love”) echoes Lucretius’ cynical *Haec Venus est nobis*, though it severs the relativist *nobis* (“to us”). Thus Shelley’s love is not a sort of sickness or madness.

⁴⁰ *On Love*, 503.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Rather, it “is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists.”

Perhaps, though, this grand notion of love worked better in theory than in practice. In 1818 and 1819, while Byron was living in Venice with his menagerie of monkeys and his miscellany of harlots, Percy and Mary were becoming more and more estranged. When Shelley wrote in *On Love* of “lips of motionless ice,” he was likely referring to his own experience. In another fragment, entitled “Misery,” Shelley gives reign to his *ressentiment* to an extent unique in his verse:

Kiss me;--oh! thy lips are cold:
Round my neck thine arms enfold—
They are soft, but chill and dead;
And thy tears upon my head
Burn like points of frozen lead...
...
Clasp me till our hearts be grown
Like two shadows into one; (ll. 36-50).

It is easy to see the verbal echoes between his fragment *On Love* and “Misery,” his thinly veiled address to Mary, but what interests me here is the haunting image of their two hearts growing “like two shadows into one.” What blend together there are not two material bodies, nor exactly two *images* of material bodies like Lucretius’ simulacra, but two *shadows*, the *negative* images of bodies, the absence of light like two unseen wounds. This is categorically *not* love, and yet its image foreshadows by about a year Shelley’s most extended poem about love, *Epipsychidion*—that infinitely self-conscious and self-doubting love poem written to Teresa Viviani, the nineteen year old girl confined by her tyrannical father in a convent.

The central conflict of *Epipsychidion* is an ontological conflict. It is a conflict between an inhuman Lucretian universe governed by atoms, voids, and chance, and a Schellingian or Platonic universe governed by spirit, plentitude and polarity. And if this is its fundamental conflict, then its fundamental question is Byronian: can a union exist which is *not* predicated on a violent overwhelming of the weaker by the stronger? For Plato our love’s strongest impulse is “intimately to mix and melt and to be melted together with [a] beloved, so that one should be made out of two,” because “according to our original nature, we were once entire.”⁴² In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley explores whether it is possible to resist such an impulse while still escaping from the prison of solitude and retaining a love’s true kernel. Can, he asks, one and one make two?

We should not assume that in every case the stronger overwhelming the weaker is simply a stronger entity (such as, say, *Epipsychidion*’s narrator, the Count Cenci, or Great Britain) absorbing and assimilating a weaker one (such as Emily, Beatrice Cenci, or Ireland). Rather, and this perhaps explains the narrator’s death at the end of the poem, each is absorbed by precisely *the One*. This *One* un-differentiates not merely the victim, but also the offender—each are placeholders in a larger and more serious game. The perhaps impossible goal of the poem, therefore, is to avoid subsumption beneath the One while still breaking free of solitude, of sustaining “difference without discord” (l. 144) by allowing Love to create an “unentangled intermixture” (ll. 93-4). The degree to which the grammar of this phrase strains to describe something beyond description should indicate the difficulty of such a task. Indeed, the poem fails to give us a working model of an “unentangled intermixture,” just as *On Love* leaves Shelley feeling abandoned in a “savage and distant land.”

The body of *Epipsychidion* divides easily into three distinct parts, each of which operates according to its own particular logic, and ends with its own particular crescendo. Overall the movement between the three phases of the poem enacts a failed dialectic between Lucretian and

⁴² See Shelley’s translation of *The Symposium* in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, 91.

Schellingian ontologies. We might call the three phases of the poem, respectively, the *Lucretian phase* (ll. 1-189) on account of its opposition to “the heart that loves, the brain that contemplates, / The life that wears, the spirit that creates / One object, one form” (ll. 170-2); the *Alastorian phase* (ll. 190-407) because of its rewriting of the Alastor myth and its preoccupation with “this glorious One” (l. 336); and finally the *Imperial phase* (ll. 407-591) in which the narrator invites Emily to a solitary island, reminiscent of *the Tempest*,⁴³ which is “a far Eden of the purple East” (l. 417) in order to “become the same” (l. 573). Taken together these three sections might stand in for the three elements in our characterization of Romantic love: 1+1=1. A Lucretian worldview coupled with a naïve Schellingian (or Platonic) worldview yields, ultimately, an Imperial worldview: the stronger swallows the weaker and the One wins out, mirroring the narrator’s (unconscious, failed) attempt to overtake Emily.

From the poem’s epigraph it is clear that Emily has already been overtaken. Taking a cue from Mallarmé’s *Coup de des*, we can read straight across the typefaces of the dedication and epigraph: “VERSES ADDRESSED TO THE NOBLE AND UNFORTUNATE LADY, EMILIA V—, NOW IMPRISONED IN THE CONVENT OF —“ “HER OWN WORDS.” Thus the dashes disguising the convent’s name can work as a hinge, bridging two divided parts of a sentence and trapping Emily within “her own words.” In a deconstructive turn (and there are many, in Shelley), the dashes really do work to hide her true convent—it names the convent by not naming it. Her “own words,” printed in Italian, are what separate these two halves of the divided sentence: “The loving soul launches beyond [*fuori*, outside] creation, and creates for itself [*si crea*] in the infinite a World

⁴³ This comparison is not arbitrary. Shelley was reading *The Tempest* in January, 1820 just before composing disjointed lines in March, 1820 which would later (around November or December) become part of the completed *Epipsychidion*. Also, within a year of finishing *Epipsychidion*, Shelley began working on what he thought would be his next long poem—a verse drama based loosely around *The Tempest* in which an enchantress on a remote island creates a storm to capture an Indian pirate. Shelley, however, abandoned this new work after a few pages. See Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* (London: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 571.

all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf.”⁴⁴ The confining convent then becomes not merely the house of her tyrannical father, but perhaps that “World all its own.” That World is a “soul within the soul” (l. 455), “this soul out of my soul” (l. 238) also referenced in Shelley’s essay *On Love* and twice within *Epipsychidion*—in spite of the title’s contested etymology, it is a sort of *Epi-psychidion* (a soul within a soul).⁴⁵ Over the course of the poem that World narrows and becomes the island’s “erotic cartography” within which Emily and the narrator become imprisoned.⁴⁶

Part I. The Lucretian Phase (ll. 1-189): In the beginning of the poem, however, Emily is described as something entirely incapable of being imprisoned or contained—she is, in fact, something that borders on the ethereal. Throughout this section, and into the next, the narrator keeps trying to push back the limit of what can be properly described as matter, and he does this through a minute and multifarious examination of varying conceptions of mixture, blending and entanglement. Throughout the poem there are, in fact, too many different examples and descriptions of the ways in which Love can combine two beings to list all of them here, and the reason for this multiplicity is that matter keeps getting in the way. When matter combines it threatens to turn all difference or identity into something resembling the “lump of death” or “chaos of hard clay” in Byron’s “Darkness” (l. 72). Hence early on Emily is described as a

Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
All that is insupportable in thee

⁴⁴ Translation given by Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* (392), and altered slightly by myself.

⁴⁵ The translation of the title of *Epipsychidion* as “soul within a soul,” once again, has all but been debunked, though I argue that the notion of a soul within a soul still resonates with the themes and language of the poem itself. See Wasserman’s *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 418-19.

⁴⁶ The provocative phrase “erotic cartography” comes from Samuel Gladden’s *Shelley’s Textual Seductions: Plotting Utopia in the Erotic and Political Works* (London: Routledge, 2002), 173.

Of light, and love, and immortality! (ll. 21-4).

At first, such a hyperbolic description appears to be the result of the fact that the beginning of the poem echoes the classical invocation of a muse, like Lucretius’ invocation of Venus at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura*—but Shelley’s hyperbole continues for nearly six hundred more lines. One could in fact say that this exaggerated, transcendental attribution given to Emily is the central problematic of the poem. Just as many have criticized Lucretius for invoking a god at the beginning of a work that sets itself to the task of breaking apart gods and idols,⁴⁷ Shelley’s transcendental description of Emily as harbinger and carrier of Love fundamentally clashes with the Lucretian background that informs his entire poetic thought.

Lucretius himself actually faces this same problem—not in his cynical examination of love, but in his description of sensation and thought. After concluding that “the soul... has a threefold nature” (i.e. is composed of atoms of air, heat and wind), Lucretius suddenly backs up: “But all these three components together are not enough to create sentience” (ll. 238-40). Then, like any good philosopher in the midst of a logical crisis, Lucretius posits “a fourth [substance]” (l. 241): “Than this there is nothing more mobile or more tenuous—nothing whose component atoms are smaller or smoother. This is it that sets the sensory motions coursing through the limbs” (ll. 243-6). In skeptical, materialist fashion Lucretius pays careful attention to remind us that “this one has no name” (l. 242), but that it is nevertheless matter. *Epipsychidion* is a narrative search for this fourth substance under the auspices of love and light.

In a reference to both the Song of Songs and to his own *Revolt of Islam*, *Epipsychidion*’s author / narrator makes an impossible wish:

Would we two had been twins of the same mother!

Or, that the name my heart lent to another

⁴⁷ See the introduction to Copley’s translation (p. xvi). Copley dismisses the criticisms by way of saying that Lucretius is not invoking a transcendental god (Venus), but merely what that god stands for (i.e. the creative force of nature).

Could be a sister bond for her and thee,

Blending two beams in one eternity! (ll. 45-8).

Here the narrator / Shelley makes an implicit reference to his current love (presumably Mary), and the metaphor of the “radiant form of Woman” begins to work as a vehicle for blending human souls—first Mary and Emily, and then the narrator and Emily: “How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me! / I am not thine: I am part of *thee*” (ll. 51-2). After this blending of lights, Emily turns from the “Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!” (l. 26) to a “Sweet Lamp!” which lures the poet’s “moth-like Muse” to burn “its wings” (l. 53). The poet quickly follows, and arrives at one of the poem’s most complicated passages:

In her mild lights the starry spirits dance,
The sun-beams of those wells which ever leap
Under the lightnings of the soul -- too deep
For the brief fathom -- line of thought or sense
The glory of her being, issuing thence,
Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade
Of unentangled intermixture, made
By Love, of light and motion: one intense
Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,
Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing
Around her cheeks and utmost fingers glowing
With the unintermitted blood, which there
Quivers, (as in a fleece of snow-like air
The crimson pulse of living morning quiver,)
Continuously prolonged, and ending never
Till they are lose, and in that Beauty furled
Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;
Scarce visible from extreme loveliness (ll. 87-104).

Here we are given the first extended description of blending in the poem, and we should immediately notice that the problem is that of Lucretius’ unnamed substance: how does an

“unentangled intermixture... of light and motion” interact with an atomic universe composed of the staccato “dead, blank, cold air”?

It is like, we are told, the “crimson pulse of living morning” staining, or rather *quivering within*, a Lucretian void of “a fleece of snow-like air.” Such a description, however, is insufficient, and we are given a fleet of others: “in the soul a wild odor is felt, / Beyond sense”; and this is “like fiery dews that melt / Into the bosom of a frozen bud” (ll. 108-10). The first example is impossible, and the second is given as merely a simile, and therefore we are still left wondering. Is the Platonic or Schellingian “one serene Omnipresence” compatible with the quasi-Lucretian “one intense diffusion”? The ontological problem has become a poetic problem, and it is at this point that the narrator, desperate, turns as close as one can possibly get to “Metaphor” (l. 120):

See where she stands! a mortal shape indued
With love and life and light and deity,
And motion which may change but cannot die;
An image of some bright Eternity (ll. 112-5).

I say that the narrator does not *quite* turn to metaphor at this point because here, still, we are in the realm of sight and we are unsure whether or not to believe our eyes. The description is not necessarily of Emily, but merely of the location “where she stands.” And even when the narrator does directly call her (or her *place*) “A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning” (l. 120) we are still only at the edge of metaphor because the metaphor has been named as such. Here again we are encounter what Karen Weisman has called the poem’s “egregious transparency”—its self-doubting quest for truth pains not merely the poet, but us, the reader. Nevertheless, the narrator quickly, anticipating his death at the end of the poem, calls out, “Ah, woe is me! / What have I dared? where am I lifted? how / Shall I descend and perish not?” (ll. 123-5). The answer lies in Love, and the narrator implicitly compares his escape to the way in which “The spirit of the worm beneath the sod

/ In love and worship, blends itself with God” (ll. 128-9). Soon enough, however, the figure of the worm, “Error” (l. 168), returns and is killed by Imagination which, like Emily’s lamp, “fills / The Universe with glorious beams” (ll. 167-8).

With the death of the worm we are left to wonder whether the narrator did in fact commit a fatal error when, like the Poet of *Alastor*, he fixed an image to Eternity:

...Narrow

The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,

The life that wears, the spirit that creates

One object, and one form, and builds thereby

A sepulchre for its eternity (*Alastor*, ll. 169-73).

But in *Epipsychidion* we are quickly taught the manner in which “Mind from its object differs most” (l. 174), and the dangers of conflating the two—a lesson absent from *Alastor*. It is at the first crescendo of *Epipsychidion* that we are given the most precise description of Love according to the skeptical or Lucretian code:

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,

That is to divide is not to take away.

Love is like understanding, that grows bright,

Gazing on many truths” (ll. 160-3).

Each description is given either negatively (“to divide is *not* to take away”) or through overt simile. Love, like pleasure and thought, is fundamentally something to be shared: “If you divide pleasure and love and thought, / Each part exceeds the whole” (ll. 180-81). They are active agents working against the One, against ego-driven solipsism. And at the end of this section we are left, although in a “garden ravaged” (l. 187) and “The wilderness of this Elysian earth” (l. 189), with “the promise of

a later birth” (l. 188). As we shall see, hope in such a wilderness is far preferable to the manicured solitude of the Elysian isle of the end of the poem.

Part II. The Alastorian Phase (ll. 190-407): The second movement of the poem recounts and rewrites the central themes and preoccupations of *Alastor*, though it describes them, like the fifth and sixth stanzas of “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” or Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality,” from a point of view of a fully matured adult looking back upon a particular stage of life:

There was a Being whom my spirit oft
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
In the clear golden prime of my youth’s dawn,
Upon the fairy isles of a sunny lawn (ll. 190-3).

The tension in this second phase of the poem is that of regression, that the narrator has not fully learned the Lucretian lesson about Love: “narrow the heart that loves... One object.” And as the return to an Orientalized “fairy isle” in the final third of the poem clearly marks, the narrator does not succeed in retaining it.

The terrain of this portion of the poem, however, is not yet Prospero’s island, but rather Plato’s cave. The narrator’s remembrances constantly bring us back to “the caves / Of divine sleep” (ll. 194-5) and “the caverns of my dreamy youth” (l. 217) where he sought the Being of his “one desire” (l. 219), “one form resembling hers” (254). In a word, he sought *One* (ll. 256, 271, 277) with a capital O, with whom he could blend his own being. Even when the narrator manages to flee from these caverns into the light, he is inevitably led back to them by this *One*. The blending of souls also never succeeds, and with each unsuccessful attempt to describe what such blending might be like, we get the feeling that the blending cannot happen *until* it is properly described. We are

given, again, comparison of the penetration to light, music and sound (ll. 329-31)⁴⁸, magnetism (l. 348), lightening (l. 400), thought, temperature, radiation and flowering (ll. 325-9), though again none of these modes of comparison work because “words conceal” (l. 319).

This logic of concealment and containment runs contrary to what we have seen both in Lucretius and in the rest of Shelley’s thought on language, where words do not so much hide or mask objects as create and reify them. Concealment and containment does, however, correspond to the internal logic of the imagery which slowly comes to dominate the poem. It is the Russian doll logic of Descartes’ *poêle*, wherein the meditating soul or mind is contained within a body, which is contained within a room, which is contained within a world, and so forth; and it is directly opposed to the Lucretius’ soul which is diffused throughout the body,⁴⁹ and to a notion of love which grows through division. In this way the narrator inverts Lucretius’ claim that to the universe man is but a speck and, like Emilia V—, forces the universe into his soul. Consequently when the narrator calls his Being, his *alastor*, a “soul out of my soul” (l. 238), it is different than the “soul within the soul” (l. 455) or the title’s often misread *Epi-psychidion*⁵⁰ precisely because it is a soul *out* of the soul, a fugitive soul which must be recaptured and resealed within the Russian doll logic of the One. But how can this capture happen when the Being seems so out of the narrator’s control, when she is a “Tempest” (l. 312) who “shook the ocean of [his] sleep” (l. 308) and, departing, turns his soul, his “lampless sea” (l. 311) “Into a death of ice, immoveable” (l. 316)? The moment when we learn, after hundreds of lines of build-up, that “this glorious One” (l. 336), that this “Vision veiled from

⁴⁸ “And music from her respiration spread, / Like light,—all other sounds were penetrated / By the small, still, sweet spirit of that sound. So that the savage winds hung mute around; / And odours warm and fresh fell from her hair / Dissolving the dull cold in the frore air: / Soft as an Incarnation of the Sun, / When light is changed to love, this glorious One / Floated into the cavern where I lay” (ll. 329-37).

⁴⁹ It might, actually, be possible to make a connection here between the Lucretian and Spinozist notions of soul in mind, seeing as the Lucretian soul, being diffuse, is entirely dependent upon *communication* for its very existence.

⁵⁰ The accepted translation is simply “A little poem about the soul,” rather than anything more metaphysical like “a soul within the soul.” See again Wasserman’s summary of the etymology in *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 418-9.

me / So many years... was Emily” (l. 344), the point at which the narrator blends together Emily and his Vision into “two beams,” is when we know that his plan to rescue Emily will end badly.

Part III. The Imperial Phase (ll. 407-591): The problem with the self-enveloping logic of cascading souls in the final third of *Epipsychidion* is not merely that it leads to logical contradictions,⁵¹ but that it leads to solitude and solipsism. Thus the narrator controls his “Tempest” by turning her into a Miranda. He sequesters himself and Emily on an imagined and orientalized “isle under Ionian skies, / Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise” (ll. 422-3) within his own soul, which “would have remained a solitude / But for some pastoral people native there” (ll. 425-6). Speaking in place of Emily, and thereby bypassing “HER OWN WORDS,” the narrator declares that “This isle and house are mine, and I have vowed / Thee to be a lady of the solitude—“ (ll. 513-4). Here he shows their plan to live within a present without past or future, in a present “In thoughts and joys which sleep, but cannot die, / Folded within their own eternity” (ll. 523-4). The Orient here is not merely imagined, but is a particular mode of imagination that we might call imperial—(an a-historical example analogy might be the way in which time for Kant, “a pure intuition,” is not so much cognized or experienced itself, but rather *is* a mode of cognition).⁵² In other words, the Oriental imaginary is a world, created from an occidental perspective, without movement or change, the very qualities praised in Emily in the beginning of the poem. It is an echo of the sepulchre that the soul builds “for its eternity” (l. 173) when the “spirit creates / One object, one form” (ll. 171-2). Indeed, even Emily’s “light” is thoroughly contained when we learn that “like a buried lamp, a Soul no less

⁵¹ One of the most interesting arguments leveled against the Cartesian *cogito* is the so-called *homunculus* argument which states that in order for the *ego* to know that it is thinking, there must be an even smaller *ego* or *homunculus* within that *ego*, but in order for the *homunculus* to know that *it's* thinking, there needs to be an even smaller *ego* watching that second *ego*, *ad infinitum et ad absurdum*. Daniel Dennett’s notion of a so-called Cartesian Theater, the illusion that there is a single point from which consciousness originates and views the world, brings up similar contradictions. See, e.g., his *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1992), esp. 87-139.

⁵² “Time is the formal *a priori* condition of possibility of all appearances whatsoever,” both inner and outer. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 77.

/ Burns in the heart of this delicious isle, / An atom of the Eternal” (ll. 477-9). This soul within an island within a sea within a soul is, obviously, not Emily’s, but rather the narrator’s; or, what is perhaps the same, the One’s. Like Baudelaire’s *paradis artificiels*, the island turns out to be a dystopic prison of one’s own imagination or, what would be even more poignant and stinging for a poet such as Shelley, a convent of one’s own words.

And yet the full contradictions of this logic of the One do not fully play themselves out until the end of the poem when all of the tensions between the Two and the One finally come to a head and the narrator declares a series of imperatives: “we two shall rise, and sit, and walk together / .../ till to love and live, / Be one” (ll. 540, 551-2); “Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound, / And our veins beat together; and our lips / With other eloquence than words, eclipse / The soul that burns between them” (ll. 565-8); “We shall become the same, we shall be one / Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?” (ll. 573-4). This series of impossible math problems finally ends in the crescendo that overwhelms the narrator:

One hope within two wills, one will beneath
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,
And one annihilation. Woe is me!
The winged words on which my soul would pierce
Into the height of Love's rare Universe,
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire --
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (ll. 584-91)

As Byron might describe it: “the spoiler swallows up its victim, and thus they become indivisible.” But who is the victim and who the spoiler? It is easy to forget in this poem that, properly speaking, Emily does not take part, but merely a Vision or projection of Emily. When the narrator expires at

the end, he is consumed either by his *own* soul or by an overwhelming tendency towards something like the One. Emily, meanwhile, remains trapped within her own World, her own words, and has remained there since the epigraph.

IV. One Sweet End

In the poem’s final lines, offset so as to create a separate commentary upon the preceding poem, the narrator / Shelley commands:

Weak Verses, go, kneel at your Sovereign's feet,
And say:—'We are the masters of thy slave;
What wouldest thou with us and ours and thine?'
Then call your sisters from Oblivion's cave,
All singing loud: 'Love's very pain is sweet,
But its reward is in the world divine
Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave.'
So shall ye live when I am there. Then haste
Over the hearts of men, until ye mee
Marina, Vanna, Primus, and the rest,
And bid them love each other and be blessed:
And leave the troop which errs, and which reproveth,
And come and be my guest,—for I am Love's (ll. 592-604)

In a certain sense, the poem’s frame—hewn from the epigraph, dedication, advertisement and concluding verses—works to stabilize and ironize the content within. These final lines, indeed, link up with *Epipsychidion*’s ironic advertisement which informs us that the author of the poem has since died. But can such a frame jostle us out of the monarchic solipsism toward which the poem

would seem, ineluctably, to lead us? Is *Epipsychidion* an abyss, a solipsistic *mise en abîme*, or merely, in Derrida’s terms, “the satire of an abyss”?⁵³

In an utterly different context (the Frame Work Bill of 1812, his only other speech to the House of Lords) Byron has said that the “masters of frames... are obnoxious on account of their occupation.”⁵⁴ Might we not say the same about Shelley with respect to the frame placed around *Epipsychidion*—that it reproduces in its own way the very same Russian doll logic that it seeks to blast open? Or might we somehow read the end of the poem against the grain, as a beneficent loss of ego worthy of Prometheus? This extra frame, though, does not conclusively help the matter, nor could it. The poem’s final line, to be somehow pronounced by the poem to Emily, the “Sovereign,” is “I am Love’s” (l. 604). Even here, though, we are left wondering what is the difference between Love (which “builds [its reward] beyond the grave”) and the One (which “builds... a sepulchre for its eternity”), even if we understand that such a difference can never be conclusively represented, and so must be actualized in a speech act: “I am Love’s.” The distinction between Love and the One would therefore presumably lie in the fact the verses are a relinquishment of the consuming ego rather than an appropriation of it—“we [the verses] are the masters of thy [Emily’s] slave [the narrator].” If such a difference exists, it can never be fully represented or demonstrated by language, as the poem’s exhaustive litany of Lucretian or materialist metaphors proves, and can only be maintained through a kind of ethical vigilance more akin to a speech act than mimesis. The simple fact that Shelley kept returning to the same poetic, ethical and political problems throughout his career, from *Alastor* and *The Revolt of Islam* to *Epipsychidion* and *The Triumph of Life*, would suggest that they are indeed, at least in Shelley’s eyes, never fully resolvable. What is clear is that

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, “Parergon” in *The Truth in Painting*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1987), 18.

⁵⁴ Quoted from Benita Eisler’s *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*. (New York: Vintage, 1999), 325.

Epipsychidion works to extend and complicate the conclusions of *Alastor*, and makes the case that simply “turning to love” is as insufficient a response to solitude as stark materialism would be.