

**NOTES ON SHELLEY'S  
UNFINISHED POEM  
"THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649759781

Notes on Shelley's Unfinished Poem "The Triumph of Life" by John Todhunter

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**JOHN TODHUNTER**

**NOTES ON SHELLEY'S  
UNFINISHED POEM  
"THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"**



NOTES  
ON  
SHELLEY'S UNFINISHED POEM  
"THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE"

BY  
JOHN TODHUNTER, M.D.



✓  
London

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

1887

15L



### NOTES ON "THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE."

---

PERHAPS I may be allowed to introduce the present paper on *The Triumph of Life*, with a brief extract from my own *Study of Shelley*, as I wish what I have to say this evening to be taken as an *addendum* to the rather unsatisfactory notice of the poem to be found in that volume.

"The poem," I have there said, "is nothing less than the epic of human life—the tragic story of the Promethean struggle of the Spirit of Man against the disintegrating forces of the world—only begun indeed, but begun on such a scale, and with such a mastery of handling, that the fragment stands, like the torso of a Phidian god, the revelation of regions new and fair in the world of man's creation."

*The Triumph of Life* was, as we know, the last important work on which Shelley was engaged at the time of his premature death, the historical drama, *King Charles I.*, of which such remarkable fragments have been rescued from his note-books by Mr. Rossetti, having been thrown aside for this great philosophical poem. In *The Triumph of Life* and *King Charles I.* we have the first-fruits of the mature genius of Shelley—and both are unfortunately but fragments. The unfinished drama stands in some such relation to the unfinished epic as *The Cenci* to *Prometheus Unbound*; but even *The Cenci* scarcely foreshadows the easy strength of style and the breadth and variety of character-drawing in *King Charles I.*, while the *Prometheus* is, in its whole method of regarding the problems of man's destiny, distinctly immature as compared with *The Triumph of Life*. In these last two poems Shelley touches ground in the actual world, and with no unsure foot, as he never did before.

As a mere piece of poetical composition, *The Triumph of Life* is a masterpiece among Shelley's longer poems. For sustained majesty of verse, concentration of diction, and a certain Dantesque intensity of vision, it stands

alone among his works. ] If we compare the *terza rima* of this poem with that of *Prince Athanase*, it will be seen what progress the poet has made in mere craftsmanship. For imaginative description, combined with subtle and sustained music, it would be hard to match the prelude. Every word seems to shine and palpitate in the rare atmosphere of the verse. The very spirit of a glorious dawn vitalises the whole.

In the vision which this prelude so solemnly introduces, the poet sees a dusty public way thronged with a great concourse of people. This no doubt typifies human life in this world, as opposed to the ideal life typified in those

"fountains, whose melodious din  
Out of their mossy cells for ever burst,"

or actual as opposed to possible life. The multitude, deaf to the music of these fountains,—

"Some flying from the thing they feared; and some  
Seeking the object of another's fear,"

and leaving the true nutriment of life to hunt after vain shadows—

"Pursued their serions folly as of old."



Then follows the fine description of the entry of the chariot of Life :—

" A cold glare intenser than the moon,  
 But icy cold, obscured with blinding light  
 The sun, as he the stars. Like the young moon  
 When on the sunlit limits of the night  
 Her white shell trembles amid crimson air,  
 And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might,  
 Doth, as the herald of its coming, bear  
 The ghost of its dead mother, whose dim form  
 Bends in dark æther from her infant's chair,—  
 So came a chariot on the silent storm  
 Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape  
 So sat within, as one whom years deform,  
 Beneath a dusky hood, and double cape,  
 Crouching within the shadow of a tomb;  
 And o'er what seemed the head a cloud-like crape  
 Was bent, a dim and faint ætherial gloom  
 Tempering the light."

This personage, compared by Shelley to the "ghost of its dead mother" borne by the young moon, is Life, *phenomenal* life, the "vegetable life" of Blake, which shuts the soul into the dungeon of the body, with the five senses for loopholes of outlook.

Who the charioteer may be who guides "the wonder-winged team" which draws the car of Life is not so easy to come at. He has four faces with banded eyes, and possibly these lines from *Hellas* may throw some light on him :—

" The world's eyeless charioteer,  
 Destiny is hurrying by."

The passage which follows is certainly obscure, probably corrupt:—

" Little profit brings  
Speed in the van and blindness in the rear,  
Nor then avail the beams that quench the sun,  
Or that with banded eyes could pierce the sphere  
Of all that is, has been, or will be done."

Mr. Rossetti's suggestion that "that with banded eyes" is equivalent to the charioteer is ingenious, and would give the sense that if not blind the charioteer (Destiny, or whatever it may be) could transcend the phenomenal sphere. It may be interesting to note that the moon is here, as in *Epipsychidion*, a type of the phenomenal, the sun of the ideal; but here the sun is eclipsed by the moon.

Whatever be the interpretation of particular passages, the general sense of the extant fragment of *The Triumph of Life* is clear enough; though what the entire scope of the completed poem would have been is somewhat difficult to conjecture. The great interest of the fragment lies in the fact that, so far as it goes, it is distinctly pessimistic in tone, as no other poem of Shelley's is. In the cycle of earlier poems treating of man's destiny which culminates in *Prometheus*, the ideal is represented

as finally triumphant over the real. The victory is a comparatively easy one, as custom and superstition are supposed to be the great enemies which hold man's soul in chains. Once convince his reason and arouse his will, and his chains are burst for ever. The primitive vital force of the golden age of Nature comes back with a rush, like a river long dammed up resuming its ancient channel. Shelley has not even learned, with Wordsworth, that—

" Custom lies upon us with a weight  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life,"

and scarcely surmised that there may be a bond upon us deeper still—not only almost, but quite as deep as life.

In *The Triumph of Life* he has learnt from experience, and got a deeper insight into the nature of evil. He takes Rousseau as his guide and the interpreter of his vision—the Rousseau of the *Confessions*, bearing the scars of real life, not merely the philosopher of roseate dreams of the regeneration of man. He takes him *because* he is an idealist, but an idealist disillusioned. The tragedy of idealism is finely expressed