Growing Old Together: 
Lucretian Materialism 
in Shelley’s “Poetry of Life”

Pinocchio becomes a real boy when his body is entirely smooth. Organic form is thus, among other things, an erasure of articulation. This may be why Western cultures are intolerant of any lines on the body—any wrinkles or signs of experience—especially in a love object.

—Barbara Johnson, Persons and Things

Prologue: Montaigne’s Face

What, in time, makes up a face? Nearly two-thirds of Michel de Montaigne’s late essay “Of Physiognomy” (1585–88) passes without mention of the correspondence between a facial feature and the personal, let alone racial or national, character of the one who wears it. The very physical heading instead fastens together matters we might label sociohistorical, medical, and rhetorical: local outbreaks of plague and of the ongoing religious civil wars, petty cruelties among neighbors, the virtues of Socratic “simplicity” of expression, and a series of luxuriantly self-reflexive accounts of piecing together the text at hand as a garment of borrowed flowers. In fact it is here, describing his “treatise on physiognomy” as a “bundle of others’ flowers [un amas de fleurs estrangers]” that Montaigne first uses the word “physiognomy” at all.1 Contrary to later modern understandings of corporeality, the essay’s relationship to its title suggests that the task of interpreting the features of a physical body or face (physio + gnomen) discloses not
psychological character or national type, but a local and contingent history: the complex sequence of incidents, affects, and influences (political, medical, and literary) that shape a personal face over the course of a shared historical interval. The essay makes one wonder not only what bundle of strangers’ words the “I” animates in this form of life writing but also whether the physical body we now call “biological” is not similarly animated, whether its living morphology might be conceived as a more fortuitous bundle of others’ “flowers” and “troubles.”

The first overt aim of Montaigne’s essay—as of its echoes in a certain familiar strain of romantic aesthetics—is to extol the virtue of “unadorned,” “natural” expression, a “childlike” purity of self-presentation that Montaigne (dubiously) attributes to Socrates. Yet from Socrates’s incongruously unpleasant face onward, the problem of interpreting faces in the essay, the problem “Of Physiognomy,” instead propels lush digressions on local minutiae and links them frankly with the problem of growing old. For that is what Montaigne is doing in these late essays: gently mocking—and clearly copiously relishing—the “folly” of “putting one’s decrepitude in print.” The essay allies senescence with “yielding” oneself, prolifically, to the impress of “the age” and the burden of “borrowed ornaments”: “I load myself [je m’en charge] with them more and more heavily every day beyond my intention and my original form, following the fancy of the age and the exhortation of others.” The collective experience of the civil wars is described similarly, as a “load”: “a mighty load [charge] of our troubles [nos troubles] settled down for several months with all its weight right on me.”

For Montaigne, then, physiognomy concerns the transfigurative burden [charge] “of the age” upon the small figure of an embodied self: over time, he writes, a highly specific series of impacts, influences, and incorporations transform what is mine—“my intention and my original form”—into a decadent record of diverse transactions and borrowings. In this sense, an aging person is increasingly “of the age.” And yet to age in this way has required a stream of minutiae so particular in their sequence and so local in their place—“A thousand different kinds of troubles assailed me in single file,” writes Montaigne—that to be so shaped is to become not typical, but irreproducible, to acquire a unique face. The corporeality of old age takes extremely particular and collective form in Montaigne. Senescing into an increasingly “borrowed” self, the essayist claims to write from a position of generous and nontraumatic alienation: “opulently,” and in “ignorance.”

**Matter that Figures**

This essay is not, at least not directly, about Montaigne’s late life writing, but about Percy Shelley’s final “poetry of life.” Still, Montaigne’s
weathered and composite physiognomy serves as its emblem because those earlier modern wrinkles knit together biological and historical ages much as the wrinkled faces in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* (1822) can be seen to do. In Shelley’s last, long, fragmentary poem, faces age under the pressure of a markedly historical atmosphere, one in which a belated image of Napoléon in chains can physically transfigure a person’s face: “I felt my cheek / Alter to see the great form pass away” (224–25). The poem ends picturing senescent bodies as the unintended work of multitudes, each wrinkle attesting, in a way that is not legible like a text and not evident in the texts of monumental history, to the attenuated impacts of a shared historical present.

*The Triumph of Life* was made famous, in late twentieth-century criticism, for the way its “disfigured” faces allegorized the verbal and material violence inherent in figuration as a function of reparative reading. In this article, however, I attempt to show how *The Triumph*’s last lines pointedly cease to construe figuration as a principally verbal or cognitive process at all.8 The neglected “new Vision” (434) with which Shelley’s poem breaks off instead urges readers to review the scene of life that *The Triumph of Life* has been showing all along, but this time under changed philosophical and poetic premises about the relation between life, matter, and trope.9 For Shelley summons a very old poetic science to achieve his “new Vision,” pointedly depositing the poem’s speakers and its readers in the midst of a closely adapted scene from Lucretius’s classical materialist epic, *De rerum natura* (c. 55 BCE).10 This ancient atomist scene depicts the sensation of “Vision” itself as a figurative effect of material dissolution.

Though the allusion to *De rerum natura* is widely acknowledged, its stakes have not been grasped in their specificity and ramifications, for what Shelley’s poem expressly retrieves is Lucretius’s (now) astonishing poetics of sensation.11 In the passages Shelley repurposes from *De rerum natura*, beings transpire into tropes, collectively producing, at once, temporal succession and the order of the visible.12 This possibility, I argue, authorizes *The Triumph*’s weathered faces to confront us with their extraordinary concurrence of vital, rhetorical, and historical eventfulness—and needs to be understood for the challenge it posed to then-triumphal means of representing biological, poetic, and historical form. Taking Shelley’s gesture in *The Triumph of Life* as emblematic of the stakes and motives of Lucretius’s afterlife in romantic poetry and science, I argue in this essay that Lucretian materialism offered romantic-era thinkers a logic, lexicon, and imaginary—a poetics—fit to connect the epochal epistemic problem of biological life to the period’s pressing new sense of its own historicity.

Romantic-era aesthetics and life sciences are frequently said to converge in the shared ideal of vitally autonomous organic form: “I define life as the principle of individuation,” wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1816, “the power
which unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by its parts.”¹³ Yet against such biological and formal investments, Shelley’s fragmentary poem about “Life” ends scrutinizing the “living air” *between* bodies, as though life’s science and its poetry ought to register less the self-forming power of organic forms than the transfigurative touch of an atmosphere they both generate and endure. The Lucretian poetics of transience enable Shelley to open the biological and aesthetic ideal of “organic form” to historical figuration, without thereby alleging the unilaterally discursive shaping of the matter of natural life. In this, Shelley’s “new Vision” demonstrates a nineteenth-century possibility of exercising materialisms we would now distinguish as natural, historical, and linguistic together.

This possibility hinged on a technical feature of Lucretian materialism that earlier modern readers were better motivated than we have been to grasp. Among the welter of vitalist, materialist, hylozoist, Spinozist, and animist ontologies familiar to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinking—and, again, to us, somewhat lumpenly, by way of the “new” materialisms—Lucretius’s epic poetic physics offered something unique.¹⁴ *De rerum natura* cast *figuration* as the inalienable activity and passion of matter in general, without thereby casting matter as either alive or a product of its verbal representation.¹⁵ As Shelley’s *Triumph of Life* demonstrates, the first caveat has rare and critical consequences for philosophies of life, while the second, I will argue, generatively baffles romanticists’ most refined strategies of materialist and rhetorical reading.

As Shelley urges us to see, by grounding figuration in the stuff and structure of the material universe, human and inhuman, verbal and non-verbal alike, *De rerum natura* purveys its poetry as a privileged mode of scientific perception and expression: a knowledgeable practice whose tropic movements keep it closer to, not further from, the physical nature of things. A materialism that, in Natania Meeker’s perfect formulation, “does not find its own origins in the split between representation and things-in-themselves,” could afford poetry a strong claim to social, material, and natural realities at a nineteenth-century moment when disciplinary norms were beginning to render that claim incredible.¹⁶

To the extent that three technical, hard-to-reconcile senses of “matter” compete in contemporary materialist criticism—the deconstructive materiality of the letter, the Marxian matter of history, and, more recently, the “vibrant” and polymorphous materials that “new” materialists retrieve from the history of philosophy and modern science studies—*De rerum natura* still has something to offer. Channeling, for a moment, the broad-brush brilliance of Bruno Latour’s anthropology of Western modernity, Lucretian materialist poetics have proven their irrepressible aptitude for representing things as they are—*simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*—against the modern partitions of knowledge that render these
dimensions mutually unrepresentable. Where each of the more recent techniques of materialist criticism has aimed to demystify, undo, or break with the others, neo-Lucretian “matter” instead names the will to secure between them, as between every entity and process, a minimal substance of relation and susceptibility. From Montaigne to Shelley and Louis Althusser, this materialism has offered its poetic science of tiny simple elements and complex composite figures as fit means to articulate the relation between apparently incompatible modes and scales of analysis, validating figuration as the material relay between them. “Materialist figuration” of the kind Monique Allewaert luminously advances, is still needful, then—not least because it refuses to concede the real to the genres that presently monopolize its representation.

“Vitally metaphorical” in the sense Shelley put forward in the “Defence of Poetry,” in his hands Lucretius’s ancient poetic materialism “marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension.” The formulation activates, at once, the registers of natural life, metaphoric transfer, and historical relation at issue here and in the pages that follow.

I next draw out the significance of Shelley’s neo-Lucretian gesture across the several contemporary domains with which it communicated. First, that of the young life sciences and the philosophical vitalism that controlled both sides of the early-century debate in London over life’s principle and cause. Second, that of historiography and what Kevis Goodman and James Chandler have diagnosed as the pressing romantic-era problem of how to represent historical “contemporaneity” as heterogeneous and unsettled “history in solution.” Third, that of poetry—which Shelley thought needed a “Defence” in 1820—within a disciplinary culture that increasingly expected poetic language to express the immaterial experience of subjects, and nonpoetic scientific prose to describe the material being of things. The Triumph of Life’s Lucretian poetics of transience, I argue, offer an alternative to the valorization of autonomy and power audible in both post-Waterloo historiography and the vitalist, biological, and aesthetic discourse of “organic form.” Returned to these contexts, Shelley’s poem shows how Lucretius’s poetic science—this figural materialism that does not know, need, or support the deepening division of labor between literary and scientific cultures in general, or the categorical uniqueness of “biology” in particular—is of romantic and ongoing use for its countercultural capacity to think livable form in conjunction with material processes that are instead historical and rhetorical.

Shelley, Wrinkled

The posthumously published Triumph of Life consists of a series of nested visions narrated in recursive terza rima by a dreaming lyric speaker
and his dream-guide, a very wrinkled person who self-identifies as “what was once Rousseau.” The visions unfold various perspectives on a “shape” called “Life,” who drives a triumphal chariot at madcap speed, towing a “captive multitude” of historical personages in chains. These include “Kant,” “Voltaire,” “Frederic” (the Great, of Prussia), “Catherine” (the Great, of Russia), “Leopold” (II, of the Holy Roman Empire), “Napoleon,” “Caesar,” “Constantine,” “Plato,” and “Bacon,” among others, in a cast weighted slightly toward the recent history of “the times that were / And scarce have ceased to be” (180, 178, 233–34). As M. H. Abrams once wittily summarized, “Rousseau” interprets this procession of “great” and “unforgotten” (208–9) names and faces as ordered according “to the degree of their failure”—the degree to which they succumbed to “those material and sensual conditions of everyday existence which solicit, depress, and corrupt the aspiring human spirit.”

Indeed, much of the first part of the speakers’ dialogue, and many critical interpretations of the poem, concern whether it is possible to “forbear / To join the dance” of mortal life unfolding before them, as a “sacred few” spirits seem to have done: whether it is possible to shun the sensuous life of the decaying body, which life “Rousseau” regrets as a “Stain” that his spirit “still disdains to wear” (188–89, 205). The interlocutors repeatedly and famously ask after the problem of bodily life in terms of the quintessential demands of autobiography and biology: “Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why” and “Then, what is Life?” (398, 544). The poem, I will argue, experiments in answering these demands with the history of the “Stain,” as if life’s logic and narrative depended upon it.

Though romanticists understand Shelley as an acute theorist of history, even epitomizing “the age of ‘the Spirit of the Age,’” this is rarely by way of the mortal, wrinkled, terrestrial corporeality that preoccupies *The Triumph of Life.* Yet, as already intimated, Paul de Man’s “Shelley Disfigured” (1979) made *The Triumph of Life* a privileged test case for the rhetorical dimension of face change and exchange—the trope of prosopopeia—in romantic writing and its critical reconstructions. De Man took the fragmentary, “mutilated” *Triumph—and the “disfigured” faces of its personages—as an allegory for the “sheer,” “unrelated,” “violent power” at work in every act of reading (116). Readings establish historical relation, cognitive meaning, and aesthetic pleasure by way of an “endless prosopopeia,” de Man argued, a giving of face (French: *figure*) to the dead that cannot but disfigure and eface even as it animates and monumentalizes (122). For each reparative act of “cognition and figuration” must violently instantiate the originary “madness of words”—the “positing power” of “language considered by and in itself,” a “random” power indiscriminately destructive of all relation, sense, and sequence (116, 122).
De Man’s lasting provocation has been to suggest that it is here, in registering through disfigurement a power radically alien to life, relation, and sense, that The Triumph comes closest to history, to the materiality of “actual events, called ‘Life’ in Shelley’s poem” (120). De Man mimes the gesture by invoking Shelley’s “mutilated corpse” to exemplify the matter of historical eventfulness, pointing out that Shelley’s death at sea in 1822 left the poem and the poet correspondingly “defaced” (120). Since de Man, the relation of Shelley’s poetics to material history has elicited romanticists’ finest elaborations of a negative aesthetic radicalism that takes de Man, with Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno, as its touchstones and casts “the materiality of actual history” as a paradoxical precipitate of the lyric negation of contemporary life. On this view, lyric registers “previously obscured aspects of the social”—the writer’s and the reader’s respective presents—precisely in so far as it “eschews the relation of self to society as explicit theme,” severing its contacts with the age. Sheer negation thus defines this version of historico-poetic “material”. Forrest Pyle’s exemplary reading makes cinders and ash Shelley’s quintessential materials—charred minima that mark the site where a remarkable array of illusions (of historical insight, ethical choice, sensuous facticity, verbal intelligibility, revolutionary efficacity, theological redemption) go up in smoke, on contact with the “vacating radical or the aesthetic itself.”

There is ample evidence for such negative poetic materialism in The Triumph of Life: interpreters have focused on the “shape all light,” de Man’s “model of figuration in general,” whose (metrical) feet ruthlessly trample “the gazer’s mind” to “dust” (Triumph, 352, 386, 388; “Shelley Disfigured,” 115). But as I began by stressing, a “new Vision” follows in The Triumph of Life, one that atomizes the aesthetically absolute “shape all light” into “a thousand unimagined shapes” (491). These shapes, “like atomies that dance / Within a sunbeam” (446–47), signal an emphatic switch to an alternative, neo-Lucretian model of sensation and figuration in The Triumph of Life, one with dramatically different consequences for the relation between the matter of mortality, history, and trope. In De rerum natura dancing dust motes in a sunbeam are a privileged figure for the chance encounters and entanglements among atoms that, according to the poem’s natural philosophy, first produced the structures of the universe and continue to propel its incessant change. Lucretius explains that the little ricocheting dust motes are “an image and similitude” (simulacrum et imago) of “the first-beginnings of things . . . ever tossed about in the great void,” “many minute particles mingling in many ways” (2.112; 1.121–22, 116). But this “simulacrum” leads Lucretius to ask his auditor to contemplate the sunbeam’s turmoil for another reason: the motes are a telling instance of the ongoing atomic commotion that they image; subsensible atomic interactions are compounding to produce these dusty dances barely big enough to see.
The motes’ double status as image and instance of their own imperceptible constitution goes to the heart of a Lucretian physics of figuration that is of sustained importance to The Triumph of Life. In De rerum natura, simulacra are noticed, not made: the simulacrum et imago at issue, says Lucretius, is “always moving and present before our eyes [ante oculos semper nobis versatur et instat]” (2.113). The poet’s task is less to impress the reader with the creations of his expressive consciousness than to register the “new thing” that is already “striving ardently to fall upon your ears . . . and a new aspect of things to show itself [tibi vementer nova res molitur ad auris / accidere et nova se species ostendere rerum]” (2.1024–25). As we will continue to see, things (res) offer themselves up to perception in tropes, “ostending” their reality into the senses of an attentive observer. Yet often “like dust clinging to the body,” like “the impact of a mist by night, or a spider’s gossamer threads,” such forms of nonhuman disclosure “are so exceedingly light that they . . . find it a heavy task to fall” (3.382–83, 387–88). De rerum natura is the poetry that works to sensitize its readers to the subtle impact of what often passes unfelt: to “arrest,” as Shelley would say, “the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life.”

Not only a figure for atomic motion, then, the dancing motes are a figure for the reality of figures, here credited as conduits between sensuous perception and realities of otherwise inaccessible scale. The famously “disfigured” figure of “Rousseau” is in fact exemplary of Lucretian prosopopeia in this regard. In a way so obvious as to have gone unnoticed, “Rousseau” is not a figure animated and cut down, faced and effaced, all at once in Shelley’s poem. The “grim Feature” (190) with whom The Triumph’s dreaming poet-speaker converses might be less “mutilated” by the hermeneutic rush “to reconstruct, to identify, to complete” (“Shelly Disfigured,” 94) than simply decomposed: “what was once Rousseau” speaks while becoming landscape, by way of a prosopopoeia so slight, so incomplete that it amounts at first only to “strange distortion” and leaves the face it draws mistaken for “root,” “grass,” and “hill side” (204, 183, 182, 185, 183). “What was once Rousseau” is mistaken, that is, for “what was once Rousseau” in a more literal sense at the time of Shelley’s writing: a body more than forty years buried. Against the (admittedly wayward) norms of lyric apostrophe, the speaking “I” does not address, but is addressed by this feature of the landscape, surprised when “what I thought was an old root” begins to speak to him. This might be a ruse of lyric self-production, were it not a touch funny: taken aback, the interrupted speaker expends his own apostrophic powers in a little parenthetical gasp of surprise—(“O Heaven have mercy . . .!”) (181)—and begins to discern a “grim Feature” still eminently continuous with the surrounding landscape.

This face is presented less as the work of an animating, lyric “I” upon an inert object than as a figure capable of obtruding itself into the subject’s
reverie, indeed, of startling that dreaming subject into noticing the action of his surround. We might say that here lyric poesis is startled by a kind of poetry “strange” to it, a didactic kind that credits the tropic force and susceptibility of things. The speaker collaborates in this low-level animation by calling his unexpected interlocutor a “grim Feature,” a mere part of a face, leaving intact its resonances with inhuman and inanimate orders: textually, the “grim Feature” is a Milton citation; minerally, a feature of a landscape. Historically, as Orrin Wang has brilliantly argued, the question of “what was once Rousseau” was synecdoche for the recent history of Europe, from radical enlightenment to Napoléon’s fall, a shorthand question “people asked in order to interrogate the era they inhabited.” Here this historical question cannot fully extricate itself from a “hill side,” or from Paradise Lost, participating instead in a subtle, partial, multilateral prosopopeia that eventually leads the interlocutors into a lengthy exposition of Lucretian figural corporeality. But to understand this corporeality as dissent, we need to examine how romantic-era bodies were expected to take life and shape.

Life Triumphant

Shelley’s The Triumph of Life opens with a scene that studiously conflates biological and imperial senses of “power,” a vision in which Life’s process is pictured as the triumphal procession celebrating “some great conqueror’s advance ... the true similitude / Of a triumphal pageant” (112, 117–18). But this image is not, as has frequently been assumed, a condemnation of life as such. Life “as such” was a matter of tense public debate in early nineteenth-century England: as L. S. Jacyna showed nearly three decades ago, both medical and general publics viewed rival physiological accounts of “life” as supporting competing systems of moral, political, and theological order. The Shelleys’ own physician, William Lawrence, was a principal protagonist in a public debate over the nature of physiological “vitality” that had recently transfixed and scandalized broad segments of the English public, even eliciting retaliation from state authorities.

“Life” was a topic of ideologically freighted dispute, and Shelley’s The Triumph of Life can be understood as dissenting from a particular, presently triumphant, and rhetorically triumphalist way of researching and speaking about it: the vitalist presumption that the question worth asking about living beings concerned the “power” that distinguished them categorically from other (frequently “material”) beings. The poem subverts, in particular, the organicist variety of vitalism—the ideal of living form as a power of autonomous self-organization—in which romantic biology and aesthetics are frequently said to converge. The “triumphal pageant” of life in the poem’s first
scene is a visual pun on the medical and imperial senses of “power,” inviting readers to consider how the vitalist approach to life might collaborate with power in more overtly historical and political modalities. Taking place at the conjunction between rhetoric and biopolitics that Sara Guyer has termed “biopoetics,” *The Triumph* caricatures one biopoetical mode, and offers up another.36

In fact, in an early intimation of the thesis made axiomatic by Michel Foucault, Georges Canguilhem, and François Jacob in the twentieth century, the very title of Shelley’s poem points to the pancultural “triumph” of a newly sovereign concept—“Life”—in reconfiguring the early nineteenth-century epistemic order of disciplines and things. “Life” had not always seemed a distinctive problem, “an explanatory challenge or . . . scandal,” meriting its own experimental and philosophical research program.37 But if, for some (disputed) period living beings resided inconspicuously on the continuum of natural beings in general, by the late eighteenth century, the difference between organic and inorganic, living and nonliving, had become a salient, ontological distinction for much new medical and philosophical thinking.

In his influential treatise *On the Formative Drive* (Über den Bildungstrieb, 1781), German savant J. F. Blumenbach proclaimed that “one cannot be more inwardly convinced of something than I am of the powerful gulf that nature has fixed between the organized and inorganic creatures.”38 Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* gave Blumenbach’s catching phrase *Bildungstrieb* its tentative but influential imprimatur. Natural and experimental philosophy was indeed delineating a specific type of natural being for its object: the “organized and self-organizing being.” The organism’s “self-propagating formative power,” Kant argued, was “not analogous with any causality we know.”39 Mere material bodies were obedient to “blind mechanism” and “in the highest degree contingent”;40 the organic being presents instead as both “cause and effect of itself,” Kant argued, and merits investigation under the rubric of its special teleological insularity.41

Enthusiastically adopted in Coleridge’s 1812–13 lectures on Shakespeare as a criterion of poetry’s “living power,” the ideal of autotelic organic form has been criticized as the very condition of possibility for romantic ideological resilience: “Only organically,” writes Helmut Müller-Sievers, “can the interminable chain of causes and effects be bent back onto its own origin, and only as organic can a discourse claim to contain all the reasons for its own existence.”42 More recently, Denise Gigante has celebrated an aspiration toward organic form as the hallmark of “romanticism as a shared intellectual project”: “Once life was viewed vitalistically as power,” she argues, “science and aesthetics confronted the same formal problems.”43 New studies are brilliantly variegating the spectrum of romantic vitalisms,
but it is worth asking whether all approaches to the problem transpire within vitalist limits, however openly and experimentally defined.\textsuperscript{44}

When the “vital principle” came to engrossing public debate between Lawrence and John Abernethy in London in the teens, both sides of this dispute—including what the press designated as its “materialist” left, in the person of Lawrence—shared a vitalist orientation in the terms glossed at the outset of this section.\textsuperscript{45} Shelley’s poem expressed an intuition that this rhetoric of vital power—whether that power was cast in Abernethy’s terms, as a transcendent “superadded principle,” or in Lawrence’s, as a power immanent in organization—risked collaboration with power of the imperial kind. This was not an abstract risk in the early 1820s.

Lawrence’s controversial Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man (1819) graphically clarify the moral and political eventualities of vitalist organicism. Ranking men in “fixed varieties” according to their degree of “organization,” Lawrence’s science discovered, even in fetuses, the “National Characters” of his human specimens.\textsuperscript{46} In light of the “retreating forehead and depressed vertex of the dark varieties of man,” Lawrence suggested, abolitionists ought to temper their expectations to the “less perfect” organization of enslaved peoples. Lawrence’s physiognomic physiology scandalized even the conservative Quarterly Review, which dryly editorialized that a “slave-driver in the West Indies” might use Lawrence’s book to soothe his “qualms of conscience.”\textsuperscript{47} More subtle, and more subtly contested in Shelley’s Triumph, is Lawrence’s equation of degree of life with degree of organization in the Lectures: “Just in the same proportion as organization is reduced, life is reduced; exactly as the organic parts are diminished in number and simplified, the vital phenomena become fewer and more simple” (95). As the Quarterly reviewer implied, when science affirms specific forms of life to be medically less alive already, it helps to render their deaths less reprehensible—a logic familiar to twenty-first-century readers from its realization in fascist thanatopolitics.\textsuperscript{48}

Without defaming the whole diverse history of philosophical and medical vitalisms, there is ethical value to noticing, within romantic-era writing, an under-recognized pattern of dissent from the vitalist and organicist view, which Goethe, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and Shelley, for instance, each criticize for “absolutism.”\textsuperscript{49} At issue is the possibility of thinking “life” in ways that are less prone to cast those presently deficient in power as deficient in life; that keep open the possibility that the logic of life (biology) bears important relationships to “inorganic,” physical, textual, and historical processes; and that do not “disdai[n]” the vulnerable, transient body as a “Stain” upon transcendent “spirit” (a position that “Rousseau” expresses in the poem [205, 201]). Indeed, vitalist rhetoric has a way of celebrating “Life” as dissociable from, and triumphing over, its particular mortal embodiments,
over “lives.” To speak of a power “hurrying from life to life, yes, even through annihilation to life” is to make each “life” seem dispensable.

Despite the personal connections Shelley and Lawrence shared, and despite their like tarnishing, by mutual adversaries, as “materialists,” The Triumph of Life takes a hard view on the version of life exemplified in Lawrence’s Lectures. Indeed, the poem depicts triumphal life, the vision of vitalism, as another damaging episode in a long history of triumphal processions: like “some conqueror’s advance,” life’s “triumphal pageant” consists of vaunting “Conqueror,” renowned and recognizable “mighty captives,” anonymous prisoners, and a “ribald crowd” (112, 118, 129, 135, 136). That “Life” here triumphs over various and sundry prior triumphalists, reducing them to “spoilers spoiled,” is the hollowest kind of victory (235). As Wang decisively proved, what the poem laments is the disturbing persistence of triumphal form in revolutionary and imperial rhetoric alike.

The poem’s interlocutors repeatedly fret the question of whether the speaker can “forbear / To join” the “sad pageantry,” whether he must “from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness” (188–89, 176, 305–6). But “forbear” can mean either to abstain or to tolerate, and, thanks to the particular logic of parades that makes the “spectator” constitutive of the event, the speaker’s dilemma around whether to “join” is exposed as an empty choice. By the light of the poem’s first visions, then, Shelley suggests that the vitalist approach to life at present—a Regency and Restoration present in which British and French monarchies had absorbed the most promising democratic shocks—risks complicity in “The progress of the pageant” (193) that Walter Benjamin would later call the “triumphal procession” (Triumphzug) of victors’ history. As Rei Terada has argued, the most disconcerting feature of post-Waterloo historical experience for radicals may have been the growing perception that it was no longer “even possible to tell revolution and restoration apart.”

Could there be a less triumphal manner of understanding and representing the epochal and, Shelley suggests, interlinked problems “of Life” and of “the times that were / And scarce have ceased to be” (233–34)?

The Triumph of Life goes on to counter the vitalist celebration of new, powerful, autonomous, teleological, self-organized life with a vision of life as a flagrantly disorganized and disorganizing effect: an obsolescent and transitive expression between bodies that multiplies their relations and exacerbates their contingency. Here “women foully disarrayed / Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind” (165–66). To read The Triumph of Life as contravening vitalism for the sake of life, or better, for the sake of “those who live,” begins to redress a symptomatic asymmetry in the poem’s critical reception.

On the one hand, as we have seen, Shelley’s poem is a privileged test case for deconstructive readings; on the other, the only one of Shelley’s poems to have
“Life” in its title has received curiously little attention within the recent outpouring of scholarship on the romantic life sciences. This is because, viewed from within the frame of vitalist organicism, *The Triumph of Life* seems to have nothing to say about life: as Gigante observes from this perspective, “Rousseau” in the poem “may speak the word *Life*, but... he appears not to know what it means.” Not quite: Shelley’s characters are dissenting from what much of mainstream literary-scientific culture says it means. The poem is therefore preoccupied with vitalism’s constitutive exclusions, which are not incidentally deconstruction’s watchwords: the inorganic, the material, the mechanical, and the dead. And it shows that these terms are not necessarily anathema to “life” otherwise conceived.

It will be through, not despite, its formal and thematic interest in death and the special strain of anachronistic materialism that Shelley’s poem participates in the cultural debate about living form, and not just its violent negation via the materiality of the letter. Like Goethe’s *Morphology* in the late teens, it finds Lucretius’s prebiological materialism useful for asking after the forms and features of natural and cultural life that would become unrepresentable (1) under the aegis of a science of life defined “absolutely” against the laws and logics of nonliving entities and processes, and (2) as a consequence of poetry’s marginalization from the field of natural scientific representation. Shelley’s invocation of Lucretian poetic atomism, in its untimely ignorance of the polemical uniqueness of modern “life,” as of modern “literature,” has the force of a cultural counterweight, keeping the science of the living in contact with other kinds of composed and decomposing forms.

For Shelley’s poem next draws us thoroughly outside the vitalist frame, summoning readers to an ancient materialist philosophy that accounted for life without implementing an ontological distinction between the living and other beings, without investing the matter of their bodies with an immaterial “superadded” principle, and even without understanding that matter as distinguished from other kinds by an immanent power or property. Atoms and void, *De rerum natura* insists, are the universe’s sole components, and they are not alive. Nor is nature in its totality. Life, self, and sentience issue as second-order effects of the atoms’ intricate, accidental concrescences—and they are lost completely at death, when the component pieces disperse and persons, as Shelley’s poem puts it, “die in rain” (157). Turning to Lucretius to roll back the agon between organic and inorganic being, Shelley next positions material susceptibility to influence, to decay, and to morphological transfiguration—as central, rather than inimical, to life. The last part of *The Triumph of Life* turns the organicist focus on “unity... produced *ab intra*” inside out, focusing instead the animating effects of the “living air” between beings.
A Thousand Unimagined Shapes

As intimated earlier, in the poem’s last scene “a thousand unimagined shapes” dim the totalizing glare of the previous “shape all light.” Their “busy” activity obscures the grim procession of History writ large and makes visible, instead, a surrounding storm of minute and nonlinear relations: a nontriumphal form of liveliness at work in the interstices of imperial pageantry. Turning away from the famous subjects of the prior visions, this revisionary “new Vision” takes as its subject the medium through which we have been watching the spectacle of “Life” all along. The air through which subjects move and see proves rife with spectral and equivocal being: a “living storm” rife with cast-off matter and errant particles worked into “busy phantoms” by the sunlight (466, 534).

Reporting from the poem’s new immersive perspective, a perspective “plunged” within “the thickest billows of the living storm,” “Rousseau” describes “The earth” as “grey with phantoms,” and “the air” as “peopled with dim forms” (467, 466, 482–83). He then explains at length his gradual realization that the whole dense atmosphere in which he is immersed is a weather system of discarded faces, cast-off “masks” that erode the distinction between physical and rhetorical figures:

“...—I became aware

“Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained
    The track in which we moved; after brief space
From every form the beauty slowly waned,

“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; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
    These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown

“In Autumn evening from a poplar tree—
    Each, like himself and like each other were,
At first, but soon distorted seemed to be

“Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air,
And of this stuff the car’s creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there
As the sun shapes the clouds—thus, on the way
    Mask after mask fell from the countenance
    And form of all..."

(516–37)

Plunging “Rousseau” into the “living storm,” the poem has plunged readers into book 4 of *De rerum natura* (Shelley’s favorite, as he once wrote a friend). Here Lucretius claims that all things, as they decay in time, scatter fine atomic husks from the surfaces of their bodies. Like a snake’s discarded skin, these airborne exfoliations preserve the “form and figure [*et formai servare figuram*]” of the body from which they were shed; they “flit about hither and thither through the air,” transporting atom-thin likenesses of bodies across the distances between them (4.69, 32). As Thomas Creech’s popular English translation of *De rerum natura* had it:

A Stream of Forms from ev’ry Surface flows,
    Which may be call’d the Film or Shell of Those:
    Because they bear the Shape, they show the Frame,
    And Figure of the bodies whence they came

Sentient beings perceive other bodies by means of these extravagant films, whose touch occasions sensation and thought when they impinge upon a susceptible organ. Exceedingly slight, these “semblances and tenuous figures [*effigias tenuisque figuras*]” (4.42) are amenable to dissolution and recombination—“Each, like himself and like each other were, / At first, but soon distorted seem to be,” as Shelley has it; coalescing or expanding, they join the clouds that form our atmosphere—“Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air.” Perhaps most critically for their Shelleyan adaptation, Lucretian *figurae* “wander” long distance and long term, texturing any perceived present with shades of distant and prior happenings: “the spent vision of the times that were / And scarce have ceased to be” (233–34).

Lucretius calls these shapes by names that belong as much to rhetoric as to physics and, in most philosophies, connote no physical being at all: *simulacra, figurae, imagines*. Offering no separate ontology for the verbal *figurae* that occur in his poem, the physical ones (*perplexis figuris*) that are the objects of his science, and the tenuous ones (*tenuisque figuras*) that transfer those objects into his senses, neither the physics nor the poetry of *De rerum natura* enforces a distinction in kind between physical, phenomenal, and rhetorical shapes. Here figures are fractions of the real estranged from their sources, and all bodies, not just verbal ones, are granted the capacity, indeed the necessity, of producing them. Beings transpire into tropes, because to have a physical figure, a body compounded of parts, is to emit figures as those parts fall away. Shelley’s poem points us, then,
toward materialist figuration as a mode of decadent (down-falling) and extravagant (outward-wandering) transfer: a process by which corporeal beings produce an order of sensible experience that is coextensive with their transience, an order no less real, material, or consequential for being figural and transitory. By Lucretian lights we can read the “thousand unimagined shapes” of Shelley’s “new Vision” in a different sense. Such shapes may be “unimagined” because they are, tenuously, exogenously real.

The possibility goes some way to account for an observation that recurs in the most sensitive assessments of Shelleyan figuration from the early nineteenth century to the present: that it has a peculiar pretense at substance, at being “something more” than metaphor. Shelley, wrote Hazlitt, paints “pictures on gauze...and then proceeds to prove their truth by describing them in detail as matters of fact”; Walter Benjamin wrote of Shelley’s particular “grip [Griff]” on allegory.66 William Keach traced the disorienting effects of Shelleyan language to a penchant for “reversed or inverted simile,” which uses “mental” vehicles to express “physical” tones.67 James Chandler concludes that Shelley’s figures for history never stand for “merely an affair of ‘consciousness,’ the immaterial internality of a material externality,” and, according to Alan Bewell, when Shelley figures imperial power as an atmospheric pestilence, he is going “beyond metaphor” to claim that all climates are climates of power.68

For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers receptive to the possibility, De rerum natura’s model of poetic materialism offered something more than the didactic aspiration to educate and delight, despite the modest “honeyed cup” topos by which Lucretius claims to be coating harsh philosophical contents in palatably sweet poetic form. In its philosophy and poetry, De rerum natura exemplified the mutual implication of poetry and empirical knowledge in processes of figuration that are the object, means, and medium of any scientific investigation of nature. That is, it offered license to resist the long epistemic transformation that would make prose the presumptive medium for communicating social and natural realities and secure poetry its enduring place at the prestigious margins of cultural life—as a discourse expert in the immaterial reaches of human subjectivity, or the special materiality of language itself.69

As we have seen, in The Triumph’s last neo-Lucretian vision, being a body in time means shedding atoms of self—involuntarily re-presenting oneself—and weathering others’ particulate bombardment: “Bending within each other’s atmosphere,” as Shelley puts it in the poem (151). Beings decay into perception, experiencing each other by means of an incessant exchange of similitudes that is neither willed, nor linguistic, nor without physical cost. We can say, with de Man, that “Rousseau” is telling the story of a distinctly prosopopoietic demise and that bodies indeed are disfigured in the course
of all this figuration—but gradually, slightly, even gently. The resultant changes of face mark less the special, violent interruption of figuration, cognition, and relation by an alien materiality (“actual events,” the “madness of words”) than the routine material condition of appearing at all. In Shelley’s neo-Lucretian mode, figuration and mortality nontraumatically coincide: the “new Vision” of “Rousseau” in the poem is about giving each other wrinkles, weathering the innumerable touches of each other’s “busy”-ness.70

“Rousseau” likens the impact of the vision’s airborne simulacra to dingy, somewhat enervating snowflakes:

“And others like discoloured flakes of snow
On fairest bosoms and the sunniest hair
Fell, and were melted by the youthful glow

“Which they extinguished....”
(511–14)

In this meeting between phantom-flake and living skin a mist is produced, a rain that seems perspiration, precipitation, and passion all at once. “For like tears” the phantoms “were / A veil to those from whose faint lids they rained / In drops of sorrow” (514–16). We are here confronted with the disconcerting reality of material figures: at first like weather (snowflakes) and like tears (drops of sorrow), the phantoms ultimately lose the hesitation of simile and erode the distinction between personal psychic sorrow and collective atmosphere. “They” simply “rained / In drops of sorrow” from “faint lids,” lids whose owners might have been weeping, or simply rained upon.71 It is important, though, that these sorrow drops are not strictly—or not exclusively—theirs. Well-traveled simulacra wet eyes, condition seeing, and reshape faces in this area of the poem, as bodies participate in an unchosen collectivity of decay and transfiguration.72 Nor is it all so weepy. The busy phantoms perform a remarkable variety of corrosive activities in the poem: flinging, flying, dancing, chattering, playing, nesting, thronging, and laughing, too, between the bodies that prolifically lose and loose them (487–510).

The poem’s last vision in no way denies the worry over historical complicity that marks the earlier modes of viewing in The Triumph of Life, but rather furiously multiplies it to the point where one’s personal selfhood and its drama of choosing comes undone: “I among the multitude / Was swept,” recalls “Rousseau,”

“...me sweetest flowers delayed not long,
Me not the shadow nor the solitude,

“Me not the falling stream’s Lethean song,
Me, not the phantom of that early form”
(460–64)
Reciting “me...not,” “Me not,” “Me not,” “Me, not,” the lines rhythmically subdue this author’s iconic, prolific, autobiographical subjectivity. Whereas “Rousseau” had emerged in the poem’s first vision to lament his decay as a “Stain” upon “that within which still disdains to wear it” (205, emphasis added), this final vision chooses to tell the history of the stain over that of the personal “Rousseau.” The poem’s repeated autobiographical demand, “Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—,” is answered, finally, with a history of “whence those forms proceeded which thus stained / The track in which we moved” (398, 517–18, emphasis added). The ensuing vision of life depicts selves as steeped in a staining kind of atmosphere that, as we have seen, both animates and decimates. Persons “Kindle invisibly” and are gradually “extinguished” under the impact of the climate they collectively generate and endure (152, 514).

**Equivocity / What Shares the Air**

Nor would this account of mixed and seething air have seemed “merely” metaphorical in 1822. Adam Walker, the popular scientific lecturer who taught Shelley natural philosophy at Syon House and later at Eton, described the atmosphere as “a grand receiver, in which all the attenuated and volatilized productions of terrestrial bodies are contained, mingled, agitated, combined, and separated.” His lecture went on to list the sheer diversity of “attenuated and volatilized” particles in which the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century body was bathed: “mineral vapours, animal and vegetable molecularae, seeds, [and] eggs,” all “dissolved in light.” Such air, Walker taught, does not stay safely outside a body, but is “so subtil that it pervades the pores of all bodies and enters into [their] composition.” The English air, moreover, as Mary Favret has shown, was increasingly bearing currents from farther and farther afield, as meteorology changed from a study of local exhalations to “a global system of communication.”

*The Triumph of Life* ends by challenging us to take up the position of that laden, interpersonal, and impersonal air. From the perspective of this atmosphere (“living storm,” “casual air,” “stain”), the triumphal pageant that has been the object of each successive vision looks quite different. Powerful actors are still visible in this latest version of the procession: “pontiffs” (497), kings, and “lawyer, statesman, priest and theorist” (510)—but none of them has a recognizable face. For the busy phantoms that make up the “living storm,” the bodies of monarchs are nothing more, or less, than habitat: some “played / Within the crown which girt with empire // A baby’s or an idiot’s brow, and made / Their nests in it” (497–500). In this way the switch to Lucretian figural materialism has enabled Shelley to depict a nontriumphal

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form of liveliness mixed in with life’s imperial show: the “old anatomies” of kings are inadvertently “hatching...base broods” (501) that will ultimately “reassume the[ir] delegated power” (503).

As the poem takes up a view, as through a microscope, that reveals how the cast-off “atomies” of subjects are transformed into new “busy phantoms” that “nest” in the bodies of sensible size, Shelley takes care to provide all the requisite topoi from the ongoing debate concerning “spontaneous” or “equivocal” generation: warmth, moisture, dead matter and new, “busy,” “unimagined shapes.” The doctrine of equivocal generation (for which De rerum natura was the preeminent locus classicus) held that living beings could emerge, without parents, without seeds, and without intercourse, from “mere brute matter” (abiogenesis) or from once living “organic particles” of a different species (heterogenesis). As Erasmus Darwin put it in The Temple of Nature (1803), “without parent by spontaneous birth / Rise the first specks of animated earth; / From Nature’s womb the plant or insect swims, / And buds or breathes, with microscopic limbs.” Opponents (here, Joseph Priestley refuting Erasmus Darwin) derided the doctrine as a cause-effect violation: “nothing less than the production of an effect without any adequate cause.”

But this is exactly what captivates The Triumph of Life as it seeks to elude the teleological insularity of organic form: the decadent exfoliations of the living are “moulded by the casual air,” in marked (or fortuitous) distinction from causal. Equivocal generation holds open the chance that different life might emerge out of the matrix of the familiar: that something might elude the proper causal couplings by which like produces like. (Recall how the shed simulacra begin in univocal likeness, “Each, like himself and like each other,” but “soon distorted, seemed to be” [530–31].) Shelley gestures toward a liveliness “wrought” from already-circulating materials—“discoloured,” “grey,” and “stain[ed]”—and pointedly continuous with accident and decay. Like the atoms of Lucretian poetic science, these materials’ ontological status is not inherent, but rather dependent on the congeries into which they chance: some configurations are vital (“like small gnats”), material (“like discoloured flakes of snow”), and textual (“numerous as the dead leaves blown,” a borrowed epic simile). They equivocate between familiar (“flies”) and strange (“vampire bats”); between dying and living (“phantoms”); between the discourses of poetry, biology, and history.

The poem stays studiously agnostic about this vital, material, and figuative swarm, whose chancy productivity is a far cry from an optimistic faith in the future progress of “Life” or history in their madcap career. Its promise is emphatically, technically minimal: the last vision describes—without laying a hope upon—the atom-thin margin by which the present deviates from itself, offering only the hard consolation that material processes (history, life) must trope rather than repeat themselves.
In fact, one effect of the alternative model of figuration at work in this part of the poem is to revise Shelley’s lead metaphor for the oppressed “Men of England” put forward in The Mask of Anarchy of 1819. “Nurslings of one mighty Mother,” he had hailed them in that poem, “Rise like Lions after slumber.” Under the impact of the “drops of sorrow” we have been tracking, the leonine image returns with a vengeance but from a perspective of uncompensated bereavement rather than redemption:

“... 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;...”

(523–26)

The lines reveal the kind of prosopopeia of which “a great crowd” is inadvertently capable: their attenuated “thousand” touches amount to something that resembles an artist’s deliberate labor, as the enjambed phrase “was cleft / With care” turns the head-splitting violence of cleft into a scene of careful craft (the poet’s careful cleaving of lines, or a sculptor’s work on marble); or rather, suggests that the accidental impact of others’ airborne “care[s]” amounts to the same thing. Next transfiguring the blow of “cleft” into a worry line, the prosopopeia delivers a subverted Pygmalion myth in miniature: only in ceasing under the weight of care does the marble brow transform from stone to skin in these lines, sensible now as the mobile forehead of a living face. The conflicting senses of cleaving here—holding together or dashing apart—capture the dual aspect of Lucretian transience as the loss or waning of one’s “own” materials under the sculpting pressure of others’ contact.80

Against the passage’s predictable lament for beauty lost, then, and in concert with Shelley’s neo-Lucretian experiment, this kind of prosopopoetic animation makes its marble Galatea age into life. Moreover, aging coincides with the increase of a different form of political desire in the passage, as something animal, maternal, and aggrieved takes over “in the eyes.” In The Triumph we are eventually seeing by the light of this fierce maternal glare, also called “the glare / Of the tropic sun” (484–85). Fusing personal senescence and imperial politics, proximate and distant, this transfigured face issues a demand the poem leaves unmet, a “desire” for redress that outlasts the “hope” of its arrival (525, 524).81

**Historical Material**

Choosing “phantom” as the lead term for figural-material simulacra in the vision, Shelley emphasizes the belatedness that adheres in
Lucretius’s account of sensuous perception. For in *De rerum natura*, as we have seen, any sensation participates literally, particularly, in the obsolescent reality of whose expenditure it is the sign. Sight is “the spent vision of times that were / And scarce have ceased to be” (233–34), in Shelley’s words which afford even to nearby things the attenuated temporality of stargazing. And *The Triumph* stresses that what Shelley calls a “mutual atmosphere” brings a body into contact not only with figures shed from nearby persons and things but also with aged particles and long-traveled images. Filling up the interstices *between* bodies separated in space and time, the poem’s atmosphere constitutes a subtle but real medium of “attenuated and volatilized” interinfluence that eludes conscious grasp and linear causality. We are concerned here with what Kevin Goodman, following Raymond Williams, has theorized as “social experience ‘in solution,’” an “immanent, collective perception of any moment as a seething mix of unsettled elements,” and with the retroactive fitness of Lucretian poetic physics as an ontology and lexicon for describing this kind of romantic historical experience. Lucretian materialism helps articulate “unapprehended relations” between events both too big to grasp and too small to notice: the medium in which the figure of a distant person’s sorrow might strike impalpably, like a snowflake, and in which the diffused image of Napoléon in chains might subtly reshape a particular face—“I felt my cheek / Alter to see the great form pass away” (224–25).

In his attempt, in the theses *On the Concept of History*, to delineate a historical materialist practice that could resist the triumphalism of present progress narratives, Walter Benjamin also wondered if the belated business of the departed does not touch us in air:

Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement [Verabredung: date, rendezvous] between past generations and the present one. Benjamin’s question is one, as Shelley might put it, of “what stain[s] / The track in which we mov[e].” In fact, in this thesis, Benjamin links terrestrial happiness to the theses’ messianic-materialist “fight for the oppressed past” by way of a stain or tinge, which share an etymology in *tingere* (Latin): our “image of happiness [*Bild von Glück*],” he writes, “is thoroughly coloured [*tingiert, tinged*] by the time to which the course of our own existence has
assigned us.” The same is true, he continues, for the “idea of the past, which is the concern of history” (II, 389–90 [693]).

At moments in these theses, the historical materialist’s capacity to represent something other than “homogeneous, empty time,” is described in the language of vital power: not “drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time,’” for instance, “He remains in control of his powers—man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (XVII, XVI, 396 [702]). But through the second thesis’s questions, which move from the thought of air that will have touched both past and present beings, to the citation of the past in present speech, to unacknowledged or unapprehended (familial) relations, Benjamin arrives at the notion of “weak messianic power” (II, 390 [694]). Here “power,” it turns out, sounds more like a slight susceptibility, a mundane being claimed or spoken for that has less to do with the perspective of angels for which the theses are famous than with the fact of having had expectant parents:

Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this. (II, 390)

[Dann sind wir auf die Erde erwartet worden. Dann ist uns wie jedem Geschlecht, das vor uns war, eine schwache messianische Kraft mitgegeben, an welche die Vergangenheit Anspruch hat. Bilig ist dieser Anspruch nicht abzufertigen. Der historische Materialist weiß darum. (II, 694)]

In this thesis, then, the overlapping time of terrestrial generations and their (missed) happiness are aligned with the historical materialist’s antiteological, constructivist, and constellating intuition, and against progressive historicism’s triumphal procession of victors’ history. In an early iteration of the argument that poetry does best to negate contact with its age, J. S. Mill argued, closer to Shelley’s own time, that poetry cannot be “tinged” with “lookings forth into the outward and every day,” lest it “ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence.” But a poetics of the weakly messianic tinge is precisely what The Triumph seeks as it attempts to rethink embodied life, nontriumphantly, as transience “into the outward and everyday.” Indeed, life here becomes a decadently transitive figure—a touch, a tinge, a stain—between those who inhabit a particular present, and between those who are present and those who are coming.

Lucretian poetics are also, quite specifically, a poetics of the eloquent tinge and touch. Abbreviating these poetics into the topos of the “honey’d cup”—Lucretius’s verse is the “sweet honey” that makes the bitter medicine of Epicurean physics palatable—we lose the fact that the poet’s work, the poet’s verb, is not to sweeten, but to touch together, to tinge, the action of
Benjamin’s weak messianic air and Mill’s unlyrical eloquence. Contingere, says Lucretius of his work at the beginning of the book that introduces the notion of the material simulacra: Musaeo dulci contingere melle, “[I have chosen] to touch [my doctrine] with the Muses’ sweet honey” (4.22). And to describe poiesis as contingent in this way actually fortifies its reality: after all, in De rerum natura, reality only ever occurs because, amid the rain of first particles falling in parallel, two come into contact, initiating, “from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world.”

Shelley’s poem on life seeks out this touched, tinged, contingent matter as equipped to bring the discourses of history, life, and poetry into nontriumphal and timely contact. The poem pictures “Life” as wrinkled by these serial touches, as “a Shape / ... whom years deform,” and who is now legible not as a negative allegory for embodied life but as a sustained experiment in the epistemology of aging, in positioning contingency and decay as constitutive of, rather than inimical to, life and its science (87–88). This figure of wrinkled life in the poem has a curious “Charioteer”: a four-faced “Janus,” Roman God of beginnings and endings, with banded eyes. Clearly, this driver is no formative Bildungstrieb teleologically ensuring life’s progressive development. This blind figure drives by touch instead, keeping life’s course contingent upon the pressure of its historical atmosphere.

Notes

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2. Ibid., 809 (268).
3. Ibid., 809 (267).
4. Ibid., 796 (252).
5. Ibid., 796 (256).
6. Ibid., 809 (267).
7. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” §37, in Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 2nd ed., Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, 2002). All subsequent references to Shelley’s works refer to this edition. The Triumph of Life will be referred to parenthetically by line number in the text. Shelley’s journals and Mary Shelley’s reading list record reading Montaigne in September–November of 1816; a letter of 1818 also has him expecting the Essais from the binder; The


9. That is, we are invited to suspend our “presumption of representation,” much as Marjorie Levinson has recently challenged us to do in the presence of Spinoza’s different, if equally non-Kantian, ontology; “Of Being Numerous: Counting and Matching in Wordsworth’s Poetry,” Studies in Romanticism 49 (Winter 2010): 649. Many highly resonant disruptions of figure-ground and part-whole relations will ensue, but Shelley’s revival of Lucretian materialism should also help to illuminate the distinctiveness of the period’s other latent heterodoxy—for instance, the spatially and temporally disjunctive effects of a theory of corporeality that credits the existence of void, and a theory of causation that puts chance ahead of necessity.

10. De rerum natura, the Roman poet Lucretius’s epic demonstration of Epicurus’s atomist natural philosophy, was freshly available in a wave of new editions, translations, and imitations that Martin Priestman’s ground-breaking scholarship has begun to qualify as “the second British Lucretian moment”; Martin Priestman, “Lucretius in Romantic and Victorian Britain,” in Gillespie and Hardie, The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius, 289. But counting moments may be an inadequate approach to the notoriously difficult task of tracking the diffuse, tendentious, and piecemeal afterlives of what has been an illicit text for most of postclassical culture—an “underground current of the materialism of the encounter” in Althusser’s formulation—whose effects, for reasons that have as much to do with our moment as any other, are lately becoming visible far outside the “first British Lucretian moment” to which Priestman alludes: that of the atomist revival in Restoration culture generally, and the New Scientific, corpuscular imaginary, in particular; Richard Kroll, The Material World: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century (Baltimore, 1991); Catherine Wilson, Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity (Oxford, 2008); and Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” in Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987, ed. François Matheron and Olivier Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London, 2006), 163–203. As Gerard Passanante has luminously shown, De rerum natura not only furnished a key theory and test case for the very project of a “renaissance” through philological reassembly of atomized textual remains but also enabled the very “emergence of a materialist idea of intellectual diffusion in the seventeenth century”; The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition (Chicago, 2011), 158. Within the Lucretian Renaissance within Renaissance and early modern studies, see especially Jacques Lezra’s Unspeakable Subjects: The Genealogy of the Event in Early Modern Europe (Stanford, 1997), Jonathan Goldberg’s The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations (New York, 2009), and Jonathan Kramnick’s Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson (Stanford, 2010); for the French eighteenth century, see Natania Meeker’s extraordinarily important Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French
As for the romantic period, Priestman’s *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830*, breaks new ground in uncovering the scope of romantic neo-Lucretian culture in the context of restoring the ongoing risk, shock, and fertility of religious unorthodoxy into the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, Jonathan Sachs’s illuminating study of British romantic classicism (including the opposition between “classicism” and “romanticism” that has kept it from view) argues for the growing and contentious significance of specifically *Roman*, and more specifically *Roman republican*, classical models for a British culture increasingly aware of itself as an empire. Despite Shelley’s famous Hellenism, Sachs argues, “contemporary Britain as it actually exists is commonly understood through Rome” in the poet’s work; *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789–1832* (Oxford, 2010), esp. 3–36 and 146–75, 12.


15. On *figura* and metaphor inscribed in atomic form and movement, see Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (Gloucester, MA, 1973), 16; and Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, ed. David Webb, trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester, 2000), 150. At a first level, in *De rerum natura*, all existing things have come into being by way of an uncaused trope, turn, or swerve (*clina men*), which brings formerly untouched atoms into contact; at a second level, they also “take hold,” in Althusser’s phrase, in figures (composite con-figurations). A third level of figurative transience is the subject of this essay.


18. Monique Allewaert’s “Toward a Materialist Figuration: A Slight Manifesto,” draws on eighteenth-century empiricism, contemporary new materialism, and Emily Dickinson’s poetry to advance a theory of figuration “that is in no sense exclusively driven by human beings and that is in every sense material and relational.” In her analysis, “figures are key conduits for the exchange between nonhuman and human forces, which together act on and produce the real”; English Language Notes 51, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2013): 63, 68.


nuance the question of Shelley’s transience in the same volume, 201–12 and 212–23.


25. Carefully read, “Shelley Disfigured” instructed romanticists at once in the most exclusively linguistic understanding of figuration and the most antifigural understanding of nonlinguistic “actual” or “material” events. In a final moment, language and material events are cast as very closely related indeed—but only once each has been recast as a violent power destructive of all relation. De Man prepares the initial polarity by construing figures as agents of cognition and signification, exemplified, above all, by the poem’s dazzling and devastating “shape all light” (352). When this figure tramples “the gazer’s mind /.../ into the dust of death” (386, 388), she reveals, for de Man, that figuration makes meaning not by mediation (aesthetic, sensuous, historical) but by the pure, violent, positing power of language “in itself” (116). Only a symmetrically “unrelated power” could interrupt the intralinguistic power of “cognition and figuration,” and it is in such a capacity that de Man summons up the antifigural materiality of “actual events” in his essay. But in choosing Shelley’s “mutilated corpse” to exemplify material eventfulness, de Man has chosen an incident so brutal that it enables him to say of “actual events” exactly what he has said without them—that is, what he has said of “language considered by and in itself” (120, 116). Both exert, against the figural “illusion” of relation, a relationless power that “warns us that nothing...ever happens in relation...to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere” (122). In Jonathan Arac’s trenchant formulation: “why choose to figure history in the rigor of a corpse?” Arac’s answer: de Man “staged a history so horrid as to scare us back into the text”; Critical Genealogies, 107.

26. Robert Kaufman, “Aura, Still,” October 99 (Winter 2002): 48; Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in Notes to Literature, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York, 1991), 1:37–54. Kaufman’s brilliant defenses of auratic, lyric autonomy by way of post-Kantian aesthetics converge with my reading in their end point, for in Kaufman “the new” that lyric’s formal contentlessness discloses is defined not as radical vacancy, but as the “previously obscured aspects of the social” or “all that is emergent in the social,” 48, 51. But neo-Lucretian materialism seeks frankly to visualize these liminal and emergent contents without passing through the paradoxical moment of lyric withdrawal. At stake is a touch-based account of sense and figuration by intussusception that renders the Kantian aesthetic virtue of impartial, or “non-partisan” (Kaufman) contemplation quite literally impossible: here, one cannot but be touched, impressed, changed by part(icle)s of the object. See also Kaufman’s “Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley’s Defence of Adorno,” ELH 63, no. 3 (1996): 707–33.
27. Forrest Pyle, “Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley,” 
*Studies in Romanticism* 42, no. 4 (2003): 431. In such a reading, Pyle sensitively 
and unapologetically deploys what Simon Jarvis has since diagnosed as a mate-
rialism of “perfected disenchantment,” which invokes “matter” as an all-
purpose limit to all forms of ideological mystification, particularly pretenses 
at reference, knowledge, and sense. The atomist *materia minima* Shelley 
expressly revives in the poem operate quite differently: in various concres-
cences, they constitute percepts, concepts, and images, as well as physiological 
and poetic texts; they also work to “people” rather than vacate the scene 
of perception; Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge, 2007), 
78. Pyle’s more expansive reading of *The Triumph*’s “materialist poetics” in *The 
Ideology of Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* sees them 
open onto a protostructuralist “knowledge of the laws” of historical domination 
(Stanford, 1995), 128.

28. In a similar vein, Tilottama Rajan has questioned de Man’s choice of represen-
tative figures: “Too complex to be summed up in the term ‘effacement,’” she 
writes, the poem “cannot simply be reduced to its most traumatic images”; in 
a reading that resonates deeply with this one, albeit within the frame of an 
allegory of reading, Rajan gestures toward alternative figures for figuration that 
“allow[] form to emerge only through disfiguration”; see Rajan, *Supplement,* 
327–28.

31. I allude to Jonathan Culler’s classic essay “Apostrophe,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: 
32. John Milton calls death a “Grim Feature” in *Paradise Lost* 10.279; Shelley’s *Poetry 
and Prose*, 489n1. Compare Allewaert on the privileged role of synecdoche in 
materialist figuration; “Slight Manifesto,” 68.
34. L. S. Jacyna, “Immanence or Transcendence: Theories of Life and Organiza-
tion in Britain, 1790–1835,” *Isis* 74 (1983): 311–29. Adrian Desmond has char-
acterized the philosophical organismic Coleridge developed in this period as 
something of a calculated counterinsurgency campaign against the “leveling 
threat” of materialistic French comparative morphology. See *The Politics of 
Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago, 1989), 
11–15, 262–75.
35. William Lawrence and John Abernethy’s dispute concerned whether this spe-
cial power should be conceived as immanent to organization or as a divine 
superaddition. For the Shelleys’ relationship with Lawrence, Percy’s early 
immersion in London’s fractious medical community, and an excellent sum-
mary of the vitality controversy, see Sharon Ruston’s *Shelley and Vitality* (New 
York, 2005); also Marilyn Butler’s seminal introduction to Mary Shelley’s *Fran-
kenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford, 
1993).
edu/praxis/biopolitics/HTML/praxis.2012.guyer.
Revolution?,” in *Controversies in the Scientific Revolution*, ed. V. Boantza and M. 
Dascal (Amsterdam, 2011), 3; Georges Canguilhem, *La connaissance de la vie* 

38. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, A Short System of Comparative Anatomy, Translated from the German of J. F. Blumenbach, trans. William Lawrence (1819; reprint, Salem, 1828), and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1789), 89. The doctor to the Shelles mentioned earlier, William Lawrence, translated Blumenbach’s Short System of Comparative Anatomy into English and dedicated to him own Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man Delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons (1819; reprint, Salem, 1828).


41. Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, §65, 246; §61, 233–34.

42. Müller-Sievers, Self-Generation, 4.


46. Lawrence, Lectures, 86–87.


51. Wang, Fantastic Modernity, 37–68. Taking Napoléon’s Arc de Triomphe to exemplify the take-over of French revolutionary vocabulary by an imperial discourse, Wang argues that The Triumph collapses revolutionary and reactionary victory monuments in order to “dramatiz[e] what happens when a revolutionary discourse forgets its own rhetoricity,” 63.

52. Compare Pyle, Ideology of Imagination, 120–25, on the spectators’ false choice and its connection to Walter Benjamin. Kaufman uncovers a venerable tradition of “Left German Shelleyanism,” stretching from Marx and Engels to Benjamin, Bertolt


54. Shelley, sonnet “[Lift not the painted veil . . .],” line 1, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 327.

55. Two valuable recent works that take up Shelley’s relation to the new biology, Gigante’s Life: Organic Form and Romanticism and Ruston’s Shelley and Vitality, together devote fewer than five pages to the only of Shelley’s poems named expressly for their subject. But the early-century vitalist perspectives from which both Gigante and Ruston evaluate the poem justify, and indeed prescribe, this outcome: for The Triumph of Life, I argue, is an experiment in refusing the vitalist epistemology these studies reconstruct. Ruston writes about the poem in terms that presuppose, first, that a poem preoccupied with death and materialism cannot have taken the vitality controversy as its subject; and, second, that Shelley’s “vital” poetry must be working against the poem’s deadly preoccupation: “Even in this dark and pessimistic poem, where the materialist imagery used serves only to portray the world as one of death, vitality is possible through poetry,” 180. The poem’s intense interest in incidental, metonymic generativity is also at odds with Gigante’s reading of Shelley’s biopoetics as symbolic, vitalist, and not very distinct from Coleridge’s (155–207). Ross Wilson’s “Poetry as Reanimation in Shelley,” in Ross Wilson, ed., The Meaning of “Life” in Romantic Poetry and Poetics (New York, 2009), is sensitive to the value of “evanescence” in Shelley but ultimately affirms the frequent judgment that where “life” is represented as “erosion,” at issue is “death-in-life” and therefore “no life,” 127–29. Though Mitchell’s Experimental Life does not take up the poem, its discussions of Shelley on sensation, vital media, and “mutual atmospheres” allow for much more sympathetic resonance with The Triumph.

Hamilton’s “A French Connection: The Shelleys’ Materialism” is an excellent exception, reading The Triumph’s materialist vision (via Julien Offray de La Mettrie) as an attempt to correct “the error which allows life to be felt as an intolerable imposition from without and our best self to be conceived of as a consciousness anterior to all physical circumstance,” 154. While Hamilton takes Shelley’s depiction of rapid aging there as a lapse in Lucretian “authentic creativity,” from outgoing self-expression into “a depleting and repressive search for truth,” I think De rerum natura’s account of simulacra-production challenges Shelley to think “self-expression” as inevitably coincident with depletion (153–56).


57. See Barbara Johnson, Persons and Things (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 4.

58. See Jackson, “Rhyme and Reason”; Valenza, Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines; Meeker, Voluptuous Philosophy; Klancher, Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences; and Williams, Culture and Society.

59. Though it is beyond the purview of this article, in fact the corpuscular imaginary we primarily associate with New Scientific neo-Lucretianism persists in

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eighteenth-century microscopy’s turn toward the living, particularly in enquiry
into spontaneous generation.

does not prevent *De rerum natura* from being put to vitalist uses, too, quite
symptomatically and systematically in the new materialisms, for instance. See
Steven Goldsmith’s trenchant and far-reaching critique of this affirmative, neo-
Lucretian trend in “Almost Gone: Rembrandt and the Ends of Materialism,”
*New Literary History* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2014).

61. Coleridge, “Hints Towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of
Life,” 597.

62. See Mitchell, *Experimental Life*, 144–89, on the contamination between vital and
communicative senses of “media” in the period.


65. Because coming into being as anything other than an individual atom occurs in
the plural, by composition—atoms are, philosophically and etymologically, the
only true “individuals” (indivisibles) in the universe—to become means, in *De
rerum natura*, at once and immediately, to begin to come undone. As Monica
Gale observes, Lucretian science brooks “no separate forces of creation and
destruction”; “Lucretius and Previous Poetic Traditions,” in Gillespie and

Dispossession* (Stanford, 2009), 117; Benjamin, quoted in Kaufman, “Interven-
tion and Commitment Forever!”

67. William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York, 1984), 73–78, 44.

(Baltimore, 1999), 209, 218. More than fifty years ago, Paul Turner wondered
lightly if Shelley’s “tendency to attribute a kind of solidity to things of the mind”
might not be “a stylistic habit caught from early and frequent study of a poet for
whom . . . even thoughts and dreams are caused by material simulacra floating
through the air”; “Shelley and Lucretius,” 282.

Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy*; Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences*; and
Williams, *Culture and Society*.

70. Nearly two decades ago, Steven Goldsmith diagnosed the radical promise of
negative aestheticism in Shelley and his readers as the “Demogorgon princi-
ple”: a late iteration of the tradition of apocalyptic literature whose formalist
work on words necessitates a corollary “source of pure negativity . . . free from
the weight of a particular body” to do the dangerous, embodied, and ethically
ambiguous work of revolution; *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Rep-
resentation* (Ithaca, 1993), 221; and chap. 4, “Apocalypse and Politics: Percy
Bysshe Shelley’s 1819.” The principle is named after the (notably unwrinkled)
Demogorgon, “Ungazed upon and shapeless—neither limb/ Nor form—nor
outline,” who drags Jupiter off his throne in *Prometheus Unbound* 2.4.5–6, in
*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 246, permitting the play’s hero to make revolution by
bloodless speech act. Indeed, this gesture recurs plentifully in Shelley’s poems,
and it coincides in his poetry with a literally apocalyptic (off-covering) aspiration
toward “the painted veil / that those who live call life.” Shelley tends to picture this—from *Queen Mab* to *Prometheus Unbound*—as a universal face-lift: “No storms deform the beaming brow of heaven,” reports *Queen Mab*’s Fairy Queen “in her triumph”; people, too, appear wrinkle-free “through the wide rent in Time’s eternal veil”: “How vigorous then the athletic form of age! / How clear its open and unwrinkled brow”; *Queen Mab* 8.116, 8.41, 8.12, 9.65–66, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 63, 61, 67.

But *The Triumph of Life* reverses this trajectory, “plung[ing]” with “Rousseau,” “among / The thickest billows of the living storm / . . . / Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform” (465–68). As we have seen, the materialist vision to which the poem finally turns is capable of dispersing the (radically aesthetic) “shape all light” into myriad phantoms that *people*, rather than “vacate,” the scene. Here the poem turns with sustained, microscopic attention to the production of what *Mab*’s Fairy had disdained as “The taint of earth-born atmospheres” (4.153) out of what *Prometheus Unbound* had called “ugly human shapes and visages” (3.4.65).

71. Anne-Lise Franc¸ois has noticed that utterances about “the weather (most often rain, sometimes snow)” are given as paradigmatic examples of constative utterance: “the double object and subject—the subject without agency or action without an agent”; “Unspeakable Weather, or the Rain Romantic Constatives Know,” in *Phantom Sentences: Essays in Linguistics and Literature Presented to Ann Banfield*, ed. Robert Kawashima, Gilles Phillipe, and Thelma Sowley (Bern, 2008), 147–48.

72. The parallel to the “rain of resemblance” Marjorie Levinson has disclosed in a neo-Spinozan reading of Wordsworth’s daffodil poem is astonishing—here, too, “the self dissipates” into a “scene brought forth by the living air in which the blur of the self has melted,” 650. But the differences are instructive, too. Where the Spinozan plenist epiphany will move toward totality, timelessness, and continuous space, the Lucretian atomist picture remains constitutively shot-through with spatial and temporal discrepancy.

73. As Paul Hamilton puts it, *The Triumph* “makes a poetic subject of the objective process to which we belong, and over which Rousseau imagines retaining individual proprietary rights,” *Metaromanticism*, 146.


75. Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, 2010), 120.

76. Here the poem suggestively touches Khalip’s recent revision of romantic subjectivity to include a kind of “anonymous saturation in the world” at odds with the movement’s reputed investment in autonomous selfhood: a “reformulation of political agency as something impersonal, asystematic, and nonintentional”; *Anonymous Life*, 14, 11, 23.

78. J. Priestley, “Observations and Experiments Relating to Equivocal, or Sponta-
neous Generation, read Nov. 18th, 1803,” Transactions of the American Philosoph-
79. Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Mask of Anarchy, lines 147, 149, 151, in Shelley’s Poetry
80. On cleaving in this sense, see Kevis Goodman, “Romantic Poetry and the Sci-
Maureen McLean (Cambridge, 2008).
81. Bewell instructively connects The Triumph’s death-dance imagery, beneath “the
glare / Of the tropic sun,” to the Asiatic cholera pandemic of 1817, Hastings’s
march through India, and their nostalgic representation in Shelley’s friend
Thomas Medwin’s Pindarees, arguing that the poem’s “Rousseau” is, in addition
to everything else, a colonial invalid; Colonial Disease, 209, 239.
82. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Sensitive Plant,” line 69, in Shelley’s Poetry and Prose,
286–95. See Mitchell’s insightful exposition in Experimental Life, which recog-
nizes in such atmospheres an “intimacy,” “collectivity,” and ontological depen-
dency that the Kantian category of aesthetic experience is ill-suited to grasp;
190–217, esp. 201–9.
83. Goodman, Georgic Modernity, 3. “What, once again, is physics?” asks Michel
Serres in his monograph on Lucretius: “It is the science of relation”; The Birth
of Physics, 123.
84. Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History, in Selected Writings, ed. Marcus Bull-
85. Walter Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, in Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Rolf
Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 1.2,
693–94.
86. Benjamin, On the Concept of History XVII and II, 396 and 389; Benjamin, Über den
Begriff der Geschichte, 703 and 693.
87. In Berliner Chronik, Benjamin, concerned throughout his writing life with the
question of how history imubes memory, explains that his childhood images
“belong” to the later decades of the nineteenth century: “not in the manner of
general images, but of images that, according to the teaching of Epicurus,
constantly detach themselves from things and determine our perception of
them.” Childhood, he continues, “having no preconceived opinions, has none
about life. It is as dearly attached . . . to the realm of the dead, where it juts into
that of the living, as to life itself”; Walter Benjamin, Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms,
Autobiographical Writing, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York,
89. Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,”
168–69. See, in this context, Keach’s brilliant observations on The Triumph’s
rimes as “arbitrations of the arbitrary”; Shelley’s Style, 191.