

Chapter 8 ∞

BEYOND THE INCONSUMABLE: THE CATASTROPHIC SUBLIME AND THE DESTRUCTION OF LITERATURE IN KEATS'S *THE FALL OF HYPERION* AND SHELLEY'S *THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE*

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Introduction

This essay examines well-known passages from John Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion* (*FH*) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* (*TL*), and parallel poetic or allegorical arguments offered by both poems.¹ These arguments concern the possibility of the ultimate destruction of both the sublime and literature, at least of the project of literature as it has been conceived in Western intellectual history. It is possible, following Maurice Blanchot, to take a different view and ask whether we are still capable of literature under these conditions.

Why the sublime? First, the allegories of both poems proceed through the sublime. Second, this passage appears rigorously necessary to reach the limit beyond which neither literature nor the sublime itself are possible. This role, as the sublime is understood here (from Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*), is fundamentally linked to the question of "consumption."² The problem of consumption is irreducible in the *economy* (including political economy) of the aesthetic and in what Paul de Man sees as "aesthetic

ideology." Both have jointly defined the history of modern aesthetics, beginning with Friedrich Schiller's (mis)reading of Kant and extending throughout modernity and postmodernity.³ Counterbalancing Schiller's "Kant" and aesthetic ideology, however, the critique of both aesthetics and aesthetic ideology develops in the wake of, and already in, Kant's work. This critique is pursued in particular by literary figures associated with Romanticism, such as Keats and Shelley, Friedrich Hölderlin, Heinrich von Kleist, and William Wordsworth. It extends throughout subsequent intellectual history, culminating in such thinkers as de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. Both poems are among the most extraordinary cases of this critique. They are also allegories of, first, the irreducibility of the material and the consumptive; second, with the sublime, of a certain economy of the inconsumable; and, third, ultimately, of what I shall call here the "beyond-the-inconsumable," which emerges as each poem reaches an even more radical stage of this critique and perhaps its limit.

At this limit, the sublime can no longer survive as a viable instrument of philosophical understanding, even though it appears necessary in order to reach this limit itself. This rupture from the sublime emerges because it retains a residual element of consumption, even though it aims to capture a radical form of experience that appears to defy the possibility of any consumption. Pleasurable consumption, linked to the beautiful in Kant, is impossible in the case of the sublime. It would be more accurate to say that the sublime retains an element of "quasi-consumption": that which, while not itself consumption, makes consumption possible and, in certain circumstances (those of the beautiful, for example), directs experience toward consumption. The workings of quasi-consumption in a given experience may repress those aspects of experience that would take it, through the sublime, not only beyond consumption but also to the "beyond-the-inconsumable." The concept of experience, as it has functioned throughout its history, is grounded in the idea of consumption or, at least, quasi-consumption. The latter could also involve, as in the sublime, various opposites of consumption or more interactive dynamics of pleasure and displeasure, consumption and expenditure.⁴

By contrast, the "beyond-the-inconsumable" cannot be seen as belonging to experience or/as quasi-consumption, even though its role is irreducible in the *efficacy* or (they are always multiple) *efficacies* of the *effects* of the consumptive and the quasi-consumptive, or of the experiential. Such effects are not discarded as a result of this understanding, but are refigured as those of a very different type of efficacy/ies, which, however, are also responsible for those experiential effects that disrupt quasi-consumption. I use the term "efficacy" in the sense of agency producing effects without

ascribing this agency causality. The efficacies in question here cannot be seen as non-consumptive or non-quasi-consumptive either, even though they are mediated through quasi-consumptive and consumptive processes and mechanisms, whether those are of the human body or mind. Hence, I speak of these efficacies as being "beyond-the-inconsumable." Ultimately, while they do have irreducible effects, such efficacies cannot be seen in any conceivable terms, whether those of being, or becoming, or, conversely, nothingness, or those of "beyond" and "efficacy." Both poems unname them in this radical way.

This argument also allows one to reread the unclosed closure of both poems and to rethink their unfinished nature. (In this reading, the term "fragment" becomes unsuitable.) Instead I read their (un)closing interruption as indicating the radical suspension of the possibility of any conceivable conception of what is placed "beyond the inconsumable," including any conceivable form or name of the "beyond" itself, human or divine. It is this possibility that would make poetry, or literature, possible and would define it, in accordance with the idea and ideology (aesthetic ideology?), introduced in Plato's *Ion*, which Shelley in part translated. The "divine madness" of poetry invoked in *Ion* enables a link or glimpse into the (otherwise) inconceivable. This type of possibility appears to have been still entertained in Keats's *Hyperion* and Shelley's *Adonais*, which invoke "the abode where the Eternal are," where Keats or the "Adonais" in Keats is placed (*Adonais* 495), or in "A Defence of Poetry."

By the time we reach *The Fall of Hyperion* and *The Triumph of Life* this possibility or even hope for it is abandoned. Nothing is immortal anymore: neither light nor poetry; neither the body nor spirit; neither gods we can conceive of nor gods whom we can postulate as beyond any conception. At stake, however, is not a nihilistic abandonment of knowledge and meaning, but an affirmative abandonment of the ultimate knowledge of the efficacy of knowledge, as part of the poems' Nietzschean affirmation of life even in its most tragic aspects. By the same token, a certain (en)closure of what can be seen or conceived of is announced. The poems' unending endings are allegories of both this (en)closure and the impossibility of ascribing any "beyond" to what is beyond their (en)closures—their scopes of vision and their ends as works.

Passages

The main vision of Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion*, after an introduction on the nature of dreaming (1–18), opens with a luscious description of a dream of

a garden in late summer or early fall, if one speaks in human terms of seasons. It is a kind of paradise, before fall and seasons. The earthly counterpart of the vision, perhaps best read via "To Autumn," is evident, as the mortality/materiality theme pervades the poem. "Ode on Melancholy" may be invoked as well, and "Ode to Psyche" and its famous garden (50–67). *The Fall of Hyperion* holds together Keats's whole oeuvre, giving it, in the language of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," "a deep, autumnal tone" (60), only possible for what is material and mortal, for what "dwells with Beauty," but "Beauty that *must* die" ("Ode on Melancholy" 21; emphasis added). There may be no other beauty or sublimity. The mortality/materiality theme is pronounced at the opening, reinforced by the invocation of Proserpine and "the white heifers" (24–38) echoing those of "Ode on A Grecian Urn" (32–3). Moneta, "the sole priestess of [Saturn's] desolation" (366), addresses Keats as "Mortal," the persistent signifier giving a sense of material mortality rather than simply the opposition of the human and the divine. The sense of the mortal as incommensurable with the divine remains significant, especially in Moneta's "Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright, / I humanize my saying to thine ear, / Making comparison of earthly things" (2.1–3), echoing Book 5 of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where Raphael confronts a similar problem in conveying events in heaven to Adam and Eve. The passage "beyond the inconsumable" and "beyond of the beyond" is beyond everything conceivably human; and in that task the divine helps only to a point, since this passage also gestures toward something other than the divine. The divine is only logical, theological, and hence only human. Or, in Heidegger's and Derrida's terms, both the human and the divine are ontotheological, that which may not be strictly theological but is modeled on theology. In Keats and Shelley alike, this nonhuman also entails a very different concept of the human and of the (human/inhuman) body, and of everything bodily, for example consumption, here by Keats's description of the consummate workings of all five senses (19–39), echoing the famous passage in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (263–74). Then he moves to "delicious" eating itself:

Before its [the arbor's] wreathed doorway, on a mound
Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,
Which, nearer seen, seem'd refuse of a meal
By angel tasted, or our mother Eve;
For empty shells were scattered on the grass,
And grape stalks by half bare, and *remnants* more,
Sweet smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know,
Still was more plenty than the fabled horn

Thrice emptied could pour forth, at banqueting
 For Proserpine return'd to her own fields,
 Where the white heifers low. And appetite
 More yearning than on earth I ever felt
 Growing within, I ate deliciously; . . . (1.28–40; emphasis added)

It is worth pausing at this peculiarly Keatsian juncture of the all-you-can-eat meal and the menu-degustation meal, which is allegorically that of all-you-can-eat literature and menu-degustation literature, or indeed all-you-can-eat Romanticism and menu-degustation Romanticism. Aeschylus once said that “his tragedies are merely remnants [leftovers] of the great banquets of Homer.”⁵ Aeschylus’s remark, however, and Keats’s allegory also reciprocally suggest that, in consequence of the inexhaustible poetic “food supply,” there are always remnants of such great feasts. Or there are or have been at some time remnants of still greater divine feasts of exquisite, gourmet treats of which Homer and whoever feasted on them before him were already partaking. This supply assures both the possibility and the eternal, or in any event long enough, life of literature. This economy of poetic distribution is questioned and ultimately abandoned by Keats in the poem, as it is by Shelley in *The Triumph of Life*. In their economy of poetic production-transformation one no longer can depend on such supply that also places the poetic vision beyond consumption and ultimately quasi-consumption, beyond the inconsumable, and beyond itself. This is where Keats’s allegory is about to lead us. The consumption economy continues to guide Keats, as his thirst comes after his meal:

And, after not long, thirsted, for thereby
 Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice,
 Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,
 And, pledging all the mortals of the world,
 And all the dead whose names are in our lips,
 Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme.
 No Asian poppy, no elixir fine
 Of the soon fading jealous caliphat;
 No poison gender'd in close monkish cell
 Could so have rapt unwilling life away.
 Among the fragrant husks and berries crush'd,
 Upon the grass I struggled hard against
 The domineering potion; but in vain:
 The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk
 Like a Silenus on an antique vase. (1.41–56)

I move to Shelley, leaving Keats at an appropriate point of his swoon—"How long I slumber'd 'tis a chance to guess"—before his "sense of life return[s]" and he "start[s] up/ As if with wings" (1.57-9). Shelley's passage is even more commented upon.⁶ The vision parallel to Keats's is that of Rousseau within that of Shelley, beginning with ". . . In the April prime / When all the forest tops began to burn / 'With kindling green, touched by the azure clime / Of the young year, I found myself asleep . . ." (*The Triumph of Life* 307-11). I omit Rousseau's description of the landscape of his dream, parallel to Keats's vision (before he falls asleep), and move to Rousseau's awakening vision:

. . . there stood

"Amidst the sun, as he amidst the blaze
 Of his own glory, on the vibrating
 Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,
 "A shape all light, which with one hand did fling
 Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn
 Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing
 "A silver music on the mossy lawn,
 And still before her on the dusky grass
 Iris [rainbow] her many coloured scarf had drawn.—
 "In her right hand she bore a crystal glass
 Mantling with bright Nepenthe; . . . (*TL* 348-59)

"Nepenthes" is the drug erasing pain and sorrow that Helen of Troy gives to Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*. The vision so far might best be associated with the sublime: it teases us with but ultimately defeats the possibility of visual and, more generally, phenomenal consumption. Shelley continues:

" . . . as one between desire and shame
 Suspended, I said—'If, as it doth seem,
 Thou comest from the realm without a name,
 " 'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
 Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why —
 Pass not away upon the passing stream.'
 " 'Arise and quench thy thirst,' was her reply.
 And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand
 Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,
 "I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
 Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
 And suddenly my brain became as sand
 "Where the first wave had more than half erased

The track of deer on desert Labrador,
 Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
 "Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore,
 Until the second bursts—so on my sight
 Burst a new Vision never seen before. (TL 394–411)

If the previous vision could be seen as the sublime, this "new Vision," like that at the end of Keats's poem, takes us beyond the sublime and beyond the inconsumable, and beyond the possibility of the visionary (or all phenomenality) and of literature.

Keats's and Shelley's passages have parallel structures and offer parallel allegories (using this term in de Man's sense, explained below). One is presented with a sequence of dream visions in which each vision, already extraordinary, is from within itself erased and replaced by a yet more extraordinary one. This sequence culminates in a vision entailing the impossibility of the visionary in any sense—from the impossibility of phenomenological visualization to that of developing any conception of what is beyond that vision. At the same time, that un-envisionable and inconceivable "beyond" produce effects upon what we can envision, conceive of, experience, and so forth. Accordingly, we can only confront these efficacies through their effects. Such efficacies may, thus, be mysterious without being mystical: one cannot postulate a single independent agency, in the way, say, mystical or negative theology would.⁷

Each poem enacts this structure differently. In Keats, drinking from the vessel initiates a gradual, continuous process, first of sleep and then "awakening," preceded by yet another (preparation) process, allegorized in terms of the taste and eating allegory. This process eventually leads to a sudden shift into a new vision, that of "the bright Hyperion" (FH 49–61). In Shelley, Rousseau's drinking from the cup given him by the Shape leads to the sudden transformation of vision: "And suddenly my brain became as sand" (TL 405). Ultimately, however, in both cases the sun and the sunrise—light—are rendered, as de Man observes of Shelley, as a sudden event, quantum-like, rather than continuous.⁸ If one is permitted a metaphor from physics, we find ourselves, together with both Rousseau, or Shelley, and Keats, inside black holes, all-consuming artifacts of nature filled with light inside. Light can never escape from them and so they are dark, black, on the outside. Similarly neither Rousseau nor Keats can escape from their new vision. One is also reminded of Dante's fall through the body of Satan, including its digestive tract, at the end of *Inferno*, before he can "see—once more—the stars [a riveder le stelle]," in the last line (*Inferno* 34.139). This purgatorial vision, extended by Dante to *Purgatorio* and then to

Paradiso and recast by Shelley in *Adonais*, in part via *Hyperion*, is no longer possible in *The Triumph of Life* or in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Poetic or philosophical light and all enlightenment die within this region, which consumes and destroys them.⁹ It is the death of light and of enlightenment through light, through "light's severe excess" (TL 424).

Both poems become allegories of a radical transformation of our cognitive machinery, ultimately reaching beyond the inconceivable and, correlatively, the inconsumable, beyond the sublime and literature, or beyond the beyond of the sublime and of literature. They are also allegories determined by (quasi-)consumption and, reciprocally, determining consumption. Reaching beyond the inconceivable and/as beyond the inconsumable is the most crucial event of both poems, defining the resulting allegories. As the same epistemology defines allegory according to de Man, both poems also becomes allegories and allegories of allegory in de Man's sense. The inconceivability itself defines "the beyond" in question, the beyond of the sublime within the sublime and the beyond of the inconsumable within the inconsumable, and the ultimately inaccessible nature of the process by which we reach this stage. The process erases not only the final vision, perhaps the ultimate possible vision, that the protagonists encounter but also the very possibility of the visionary, in particular as the literary, via the mediating destruction of the sublime, allegorized by the destruction of life. This is why these final visions entail, at the limit and as its limit, a form of un-vision. We are forced to confront that which is invisible and un-visualizable, and ultimately inconceivable by any means that are or will ever be available to us. Ultimately this "invisible" is un-visible even as anything that would be beyond our reach but exist somewhere in and by itself, available, say, to divine apprehension. The conception of the divine or of poetry as that which can partake in or capture something of the divine—by way of the divine madness of Plato's *Ion* or "[catching it] from the Penetralium of mystery" with the help of Keats's "negative capability"—is grounded in this possibility.¹⁰ This view may be seen as Platonism in its greatest formality, the possibility of the original object of possible imitation, or of something that exists as impossible to imitate.¹¹ The poems bring us to the limits where this possibility is no longer available, destroyed by the poems' analytics.

Decompositions

This machinery of destruction arises in the poems' passage through the sublime and from the nature of the sublime itself—the catastrophic sublime,

a rigorous passage beyond and radical rupture with the sublime, but in the sense that this "beyond" does not remain within or returns to what is outside or precedes the sublime. This limit is also the limit of the literary, and it could thus again be correlated with the limit of Platonism. Beyond this limit literature may no longer reach, although literature may be (re)defined as a (possibly interminable) approach to and exploration of this limit.¹²

To argue this case I shall first discuss a particular dimension of the sublime that de Man locates in Kant's third *Critique*. De Man speaks of "the material vision," which may be seen as the condition of the possibility of the sublime and the way to "find" it. This material vision also reveals the quasi-consumptive elements that the sublime retains, even though it resists consumption in all circumstances. According to Kant, we (must) "*find*" the sublime, if we regard the ocean, "as poets do, merely by what the appearance to the eye shows [or points to] [*was der Augenschein zeigt*]" (130). A stable translation of Kant's passage may not be possible. It is this possibility of a mere appearance to the eye of the poets' vision that defines quasi-consumption as the possibility of presence, including Derrida's sense of the metaphysics of presence. One might say that quasi-consumption is presence, although not pleasure. Given Kant's definition of the sublime as an interplay of pleasure [*Lust*] and displeasure or non-pleasure [*Unlust*], the sublime cannot be seen in terms of pleasurable consumption or, again, ultimately consumed, even with disgust, distaste, which appears as the limit of pleasure and which at least shadows the sublime. Nor can it be simply unconsumed, vomited, an uncritical reversal that would ground the economy of the sublime in something that is merely a metaphysical equivalent of consumption.¹³ Quasi-consumption occupies a precarious intermediate and mediating position in the overall economy of the sublime as presence. As presence, quasi-consumption is the condition of the possibility of both consumption and the opposite of consumption, or their interactions, for example in the beautiful or in the sublime, but is itself none of these. If any experience corresponds to quasi-consumption, it may be something like the material vision of poets: "Kant's [phenomenal?] architectonic world is," according to de Man, "not a metamorphosis of a fluid [material?] world into the solidity of stone, nor is his building a trope or a symbol that substitutes for the actual entities."¹⁴ One might (mis)read it in this way, as a form of aesthetic ideology, as one might also misread similar moments in Shelley's and Keats's texts, which contain strong sculptural imagery. As de Man explains, it is difficult to define the phenomenality of this vision in any phenomenal terms (81-2). "The only word that comes to mind," de Man says, "is that of a *material vision*" (82).

The nature of this materiality and its accompanying formalism is complex. First of all,

the sea is called [by Kant] a mirror, not because it is supposed to reflect anything, but to stress a flatness devoid of any suggestion of depth. In the same way and to the same extent that this vision is purely material, devoid of any reflexive and individual complication, it is also purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics. . . . The critique of the aesthetic ends up, in Kant, in a formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic experience of the beautiful and the sublime as described by Kant and Hegel themselves. (83)

The sublime itself now appears in its material form, which is also its ultimate and defining form: the sublimity of the sublime. This materialization of the sublime is only a part of its catastrophe: even this materialism or formalism does not reach far enough, at least not yet. One must take the Kantian sublime further—to the point where a yet more radical stage of reading Kant, and of formalization and materiality, is reached and where how “[the] materiality in question is understood in linguistic terms” becomes more “clearly intelligible” (82). This “linguistic” understanding will bring with it further complications of the sublime and a more radical dislocation of aesthetic ideology than those entailed by the material vision, *qua vision*, as described by Kant and de Man—or, at least, *as* this vision has been described so far. For, this vision may in fact imply a more radical limit, “beyond-the-inconsumable.” At this point we encounter the catastrophic sublime, the catastrophe that destroys the sublime and, along with it, literature.

This destruction *arises* from an extraordinary “vision” of the material constitution of the sublime and, with respect to the viewpoint of mathematization and especially geometrization of pure optics invoked by de Man, *de*-constitution and, as it were, formal *de*-formalization of this vision. This vision entails a suspension of any possible “geometrical” or spatial configurativity. It becomes the first stage of the process that brings us to the threshold of what is beyond this, or any, vision; we can reach no further. This stage appears necessary if we indeed can, phenomenally, and especially geometrically or spatially, “see” anything in this radically disjointed way. For it may not be humanly possible to do so in view of our phenomenological propensity to connect individual elements, even though in contrast to the beyond-the-inconsumable to which this vision ultimately leads, each such element is available to our phenomenological apprehension. This propensity defines both the beautiful and even the sublime, although the

sublime defies any ultimate cohesion into a coherent form. It does, however, retain certain geometrical opticality. By contrast, the disfigurative phenomenology of the vision in question must divest the elements of this vision of any opticality or any other configurativity, leading, in de Man's phrase, "the material . . . disarticulation of nature" or the disarticulation of the materiality of matter, as well as of the phenomenality of mind.

This epistemology emerges in or is allegorized by both Keats's and Shelley's poems, in especially graphic terms in the passage of *The Triumph of Life*:

And suddenly my brain became as sand
 "Where the first wave had more than half erased
 The track of deer on desert Labrador,
 Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
 "Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore,
 Until the second bursts—so on my sight
 Burst a new Vision never seen before.— (TL 405–11)

This complex catachresis entails an irreducible multiplicity of readings. They may proceed from considering the violence in the change from one vision to another, to the nature of "reading" half-erased tracks and traces of images within a vision in which dream and awakening, perception and conception, material and phenomenal, reality (if any) and interpretation (or interpretation of interpretation), and so forth, are all irreducibly entangled. But, to begin with, how does one read such traces, which invite the engagement with Derrida's concept of trace?¹⁵ Shelley's allegory makes Rousseau's vision/reading divest these traces of all conceivable configurativity, even that of the sublime. If so, however, the question re-imposes itself: How does one "read" such disfigured traces? And what, then, does the poem or both poems ultimately allegorize in their allegories of such as a reading, perhaps ultimate "allegories of reading" in de Man's sense?

Until the very last lines of both poems, at least a possibility of a certain theological or ontotheological efficacy of these traces appears to be entertained, which would enable a certain opticality or figurativity, perceptual or conceptual. It might also be seen as suggested by Rousseau's attempt to give a particular meaning to the procession—the triumph—of life—death, or by the narrator's attempt to read Rousseau's or his own vision as an ontotheological or indeed theological allegory. This possibility also transpires in Moneta's "visage":

. . . Then I saw a wan face
 Not pinned by human sorrow, but bright blanch'd

By an immortal sickness which kills not;
 It works a constant change, which happy death
 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
 To no death was that visage; it has pass'd
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these
 I must not think now, though I saw that face—
 But for her eyes I should have fled away. (FH 1.255–64)

Here one still “sees” and has a vision. This possibility of vision is suspended, narratively and epistemologically, only by the abrupt interruption ending the poem itself, as an allegory of a destruction of any vision, still deemed possible, even if not undertaken, here. Keats indeed ends or exits the poem “beyond these,” but now in the sense of the impossibility of anything visionary or en-visionable. This final “beyond/not-beyond” is irreducibly materialist, as “death” is deployed as a very different type of allegory, invoked by de Man in “Shelley Disfigured”: “*The Triumph of Life* warns us that *nothing*, whether deed, word, thought or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that preceded, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence” (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 122; emphasis added). Everything, ultimately, but only ultimately (at certain levels a more classical epistemology must be retained), becomes an effect of a material, beyond-the-inconsumable, efficacy that can never be causal. Everything ultimately begins or ends in this irreducibly random and disfigurative way. Thereby this machinery is not theological, even in the sense of negative or mystical theology, which makes impossible an attribution to the divine of any conceivable properties, but assumes the divine. Nor is it ontotheological. Both Shelley’s and Keats’s final (in either sense) interruptions enact this epistemology. By the same token, closer to Derrida’s concept of the (en)closure of metaphysics, the poems also demarcate what kinds of answer we humans can in principle give, or what kinds of question we can possibly ask.

Then what is life? I ask this question assuming, which appears reasonable, that life is the efficacy (it may be plural) of such a vision, as it is the efficacy of history and/of mind and culture, here allegorized as well. Indeed, both allegories are bound to be irreducibly mixed. I also see life as ultimately material (physical, chemical, biological, and so forth) efficacious dynamics. “What is Life?” is Shelley’s final, unanswered and unanswerable, question in the poem:

“Then, what is Life?” I said . . . the cripple cast
 His eye upon the car which now had rolled

Onward, as if that look must be the last,
 And answered . . . "Happy those for whom the fold
 Of (TL 544-7)

The fold of what? Is any question, let alone answer, still possible? Is the last question still possible? Are questions still possible, as Shelley suspends even them? The same may be asked about Keats's (un)closure of *The Fall of Hyperion*, "on he flared/ . . ." (2.61-2).

Through the sequence of visions—from the beautiful to the sublime to the material vision, ultimately of traces, material and mental, divested of any meaningful vision—one arrives to the threshold (one can go no further) of that which is both beyond the inconsumable and beyond the (en)closure of all possible conceptions, where one locates the efficacies of the de-figured effects-traces. These effects appear within our (en)closure. How otherwise would we be able to think rigorously of such efficacies rather than merely imagine them? The nature of these effects, however, and their configurations do not appear to allow for any quasi-consumption-like dynamics of emergence and require the epistemology of the beyond-the-inconsumable and of the beyond-the-beyond; all consumption is suspended earlier in the process.

One might argue that it was life itself—the death of both poets—that brought both poems to this interruption of vision. That may be, especially in the case of *The Triumph of Life*, where the closing lines are likely to have been changed had Shelley lived longer. Certainly, life or life-death entered the scene and the very text of the poem in an especially tragic way, "as a random event whose power . . . is due to the randomness of its occurrence," now indeed the power of actual death. There is, however, enough textual evidence, some already suggested and some to be offered presently, that the present reading may rigorously apply. At the very least, our readings of both poems would, as de Man argues in "Shelley Disfigured," depend on how one reads the dead and decomposed bodies of both poets.

We are now ready to consider de Man's understanding of the material vision, which allows us to see the radical epistemology, the (radicalized) material vision, at the textual level and as enacted by the text, in the way they are in the (un)closure of both poems as just considered, or the titles, as de Man argues in the case of *The Fall of Hyperion*.¹⁶ (The complexities of Shelley's title, beginning with its origin in Petrarch's *Trionfi*, could be considered from this perspective.) In the first stage of this process along with the material disarticulation of nature, one might think of the materiality of language itself, to the smallest material or phenomenological marks

seen as disconnected marks, indivisible punctual entities, divested of all possible meaning or form linking them (*Aesthetic Ideology* 88–90).¹⁷

If a reading proceeds along the lines of aesthetic ideology, even that modeled on the nonconsumptive economy of the material sublime (prior to the linguistic understanding of it), one can *then* reassemble the elements of such texts configuratively. Indeed such a configurative assemblage, or its sheer possibility, defines one's reading or vision. Hence, the above "then" is not an irreducible structural operator; it is in what de Man sees as disfigurative reading. In Keats's and Shelley's allegories, which are also allegories of disfigurative reading, no configurative assemblage of linguistic atoms defines them individually. Such assemblages could only be added "then," after the event or, in de Man's terms, actual act of material occurrence, *nächtraglich* (in Freud's sense) or supplementarily in Derrida's sense, making any such configurativity appear as added to rather than preceding the disfigurativity in question. Ultimately, this disfigurativity is secondary or supplementary with respect to its own ultimate efficacious dynamics, which is no more atomic (disjoint) than configurative (connected). Once made "more intelligible," "linguistic understanding [of the material vision of poets] in linguistic terms" reveals a textual un-architectonic of any architectonic, whether Kant himself offers us this understanding or not. Some poetic works allegorically enact this decomposition, leading to the inaccessible "behind" the material vision. But then, Kant's text acquires this poetic quality too, even if against Kant (87–90, 125–8).

On the one hand there is a certain "collective" shared semantic field within which linguistic atoms function and which they obey. On the other, once rigorously considered individually, or in a certain ultimate decomposition, these elements can no longer be fully subsumed by any coherent configuration of meanings. One may thus speak of a decoherence of figures and tropes, or of all language, in an allegorical text. An analogous decoherence is suggested by de Man's remark, via Montaigne, that we must consider "our limbs," formally, "in themselves, severed from the organic unity of the body." "We must, in other words, disarticulate, mutilate the body in a way that is much closer to Kleist than to Winckelman," and hence enact "the material disarticulation not only of nature but of the body, . . . [which] moment marks the undoing of the aesthetic as a valid category" (88–9). One can construct partial and ultimately inadequate allegories of the materiality of the "body." Indeed the original "parts" or "limbs" are already such allegories, as supplementary as the "body" itself. Accordingly, a more radical dis-articulation, mutilation, disfiguration of the (un)body is at stake, even at the level of manifest effects. The efficacy of these effects

is inaccessible in any way, no more by means of disarticulation than by articulation. This dismemberment is linked to the linguistic understanding of materiality and specifically to the disarticulation of tropes, as the trope of "disarticulation" suggests: "to the dismemberment of the body corresponds a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters" (89).

One thus encounters radical disarticulating materiality both in the world, specifically the body, and in the text. It would, however, be a mistake to see them as mirroring or mapping each other, as de Man's "corresponds" might suggest, given the complexities of "correspondence" in de Man. Instead, insofar as one can approach the world by way of a text, the dismemberment or "decoherence" of language—the ultimately irreducible, uncontrollable divergence of figures, signifiers, or whatever can carry meaning—manifests the irreducible inaccessibility of the world or life through peculiar configurations of material and phenomenological effects. Keats powerfully enacts this decoherent fragmentation of language in one of his final poetic efforts, his sonnet "I cry your mercy—pity—love!—aye, love." The sonnet is an ever more dramatic illustration of the dis- or de-figurative economy in question, which leaves the efficacy of the whole process—What is Love? What is Life?—beyond any possibility of consumption, or of consummation, or anything. Shelley's "What is Life?" leads us toward the same limit. Indeed "What is Life?," as asked textually and bodily, materially by Shelley, is *The Triumph of Life*, leading us to something beyond which we cannot think.

Corporealities

The efficacious processes in question take place through the mediation of the human body, the corporeality and corpo-reality, the reality of the corporeal, which is consistent with the radical anti-realism of the epistemology in question. This epistemology now applies to the ultimate material constitution of this corporeality itself or any materiality, which by no means prevents the ponderous and palpable, indeed deadly, reality of certain effects of the irreducibly inaccessible; quite the contrary. The body, including the consumption economy—breathing, eating, drinking, and so forth, or the way it manages and disposes of its waste products inside and outside itself—supports and sustains this mediation. It must be seen as the irreducible part of such processes, while representations or conceptions of the body, including those as "body," must be seen in terms of its effects, and becomes subject to de-coherence. This efficacious dynamic is a product of

the particular constitution and deconstitution of both the life and death of the human body, including its consumptive and disposing machinery. We could not otherwise *see* or *un-see* the world (nature and mind alike) in this cohering-decohering way. Our conceptions of the physical world according to the key theories of twentieth-century physics, relativity and quantum theory, may be subject to the same epistemology.¹⁸ As such, however, these conceptions may also be tied to the particular nature of our physical constitution as human and animal beings, including the biology and the physiology of our body. To cite Marcel Proust: "the trees, the sun and the sky would not be the same as what we see if they were apprehended by creatures having eyes differently constituted from ours, or else endowed for that purpose with organs other than eyes which would furnish equivalents of trees and sky and sun, though not visual ones." Such "organs" (if the term applies) may not furnish even that much, in any event nothing equivalent.¹⁹

The question of consumption acquires new dimensions from this perspective of the body as a constitutive part of the efficacy of all our experiential, including perceptual, interpretive, and conceptual, machinery. The preceding argument extends that of Georges Bataille concerning theories of unutilizable and ultimately meaningless consumption and expenditure. He calls such theories "general economies," juxtaposing them to "restricted economies" as theories of meaningful consumption—material (including economic), philosophical, or aesthetic—such as those in Marx's political economy, Hegel's speculative philosophy, and Kant's third *Critique* ("taste"). These theories and related conceptions of Romantic literature and thought introduce subtle relationships between meaningful, especially pleasurable, and meaningless consumption and expenditure, ultimately linked to the efficacy not only beyond all consumption but also beyond the inconsumable. Keats's and Shelley's works considered here do so by a subtle literary philosophical exploration of the idea and practices of "consumption," or the impossibility thereof. Reciprocally, reconceived along the lines of Bataille's general economy, the consumption/expenditure conglomerate offers an effective metaphor for the epistemological and interpretive and creative processes in question in both poems. The very material processes at stake, from the functioning of the human body to political economy, are part of the efficacies of the processes they allegorize, insofar as the constitution (or deconstitution) of our bodies enable or disable any vision or un-vision we might have.

Consider Keats's famous description of his experience of eating a nectarine, although a number of other passages would also work well. Keats lives, lives/dies, pleasurably consuming with one hand, painfully wasting/writing with another: "Talking of pleasure, this moment I was

writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine—good god how fine—It went down soft, pulpy, slushy, oozy—all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beautiful [sic] Strawberry” (*Letters* 2.179). We would miss the import of this passage if we saw it in terms of the body as organism, with organs of senses, such as taste, each designed for a particular function. We must instead read it in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s conglomerate, introduced in *Anti-Oedipus*, of “the body without organs” and the economy of “desiring machines,” including those of writing, to which the processes in the body without organs give rise from time to time. These desiring machines can sometimes be linked to actual organs of the human body, such as mouth or hand, or to certain parts of various social and political collective organs or bodies, but ultimately cannot be reduced to such organs.²⁰

In considering an analogous economy in Kleist, de Man traces the case of the irreducibly divergent German signifier “Fall” (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 289–90).²¹ The English signifier “Fall” is explored by him in his reading of *The Fall of Hyperion* (*Resistance to Theory* 16–18). He also considers the concept of fall in Baudelaire in his analysis of irony in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.”²² “Fall” is a decisive figure in these works, as in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, where everything is in a state of catastrophic fall. “Fall” is materiality, both literally (gravity) and (intimately connected to consumption) allegorically, in the irreducible decoherence of language, as it, as it were, falls away from itself. We may, however, only separate them if gravity is anything less than allegory, which it may, ultimately, not be. It would be impossible to consider the relevant physics here, for example, the way gravity bends light itself (which would bring all three figures together in yet another way). In the case of Einstein’s general relativity, we deal with a *horizontal* fall, in some ways not unlike Adam centrifugally falling away from God in Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam.” The matters of materiality and of falling are irreducible in everything in question here, from the body and consumption, or waste—weight and waste—to the physics of black holes, the ultimate manifestation of consumption, all-consuming consumption, in the physical world; or the question of geometrical representation of physical processes in Einstein’s theory, which appears no longer possible, and hence is fundamentally linked to the epistemological problematic of this essay. These connections are beyond my scope. I would like, however, to take advantage, with Blanchot, of relativistic cosmology to close on the question of the possibility or impossibility of literature:

I ask myself why . . . the whole history of criticism and culture closed and why, with a melancholy serenity, it seemed at the same time to send us off

and to authorize us to enter a new space. What space? Not to answer such a question, certainly, but to show the difficulty of approaching it, I would like to invoke a metaphor. It is nearly understood that the Universe is curved, and it has often been supposed that this curvature has to be positive: hence the image of a finite and limited sphere. But nothing permits one to exclude the hypothesis of an unfigurable Universe (a term henceforth deceptive); a Universe escaping every optical exigency and also escaping consideration of the whole—essentially non-finite, disunified, discontinuous. What about such a Universe? . . . What about man the day he accepts confronting the idea . . . But will he ever be ready to receive such a thought, a thought that, freeing him from fascination with unity, for the first time risks summoning him to take the measure of an exteriority that is not divine, of a space entirely in question, and even excluding the possibility of an answer, since every response would necessarily fall anew under the jurisdiction of the figure of figures? This amounts perhaps to asking ourselves: is man capable of a radical interrogation? That is, finally, is he capable of literature, if literature turns aside and towards the absence of the book?²³

With this thought or un-thought, literature turns toward the absence of literature itself, at least since Romanticism, for which literature or/as un-literature became a form of radical interrogation. Blanchot's seemingly incongruous jump from relativistic cosmology to literature is logical. It is much more than merely a metaphor, unless we see it in terms of the epistemological parallel between both fields, relativistic cosmology and literature, which also involves the question of consumption in its greatest generality. A radical interrogation acquires a new sense, which becomes necessary, even though and because it may lead us to the death of literature, the death of reading, the death of writing, the death of interrogation. This end, however, is also the beginning of something else in this unfigurable universe, in the un-universe of the unfigurable, in the un-sublime of the sublime, the un-consumption of consumption and of the un-consumption or the inconsumable, of the beyond-the-inconsumable, in short that beyond which we cannot think. We, our mind and body, must think *of* this something. We must think of that which is beyond what we can think, beyond what thinking can consume and beyond what is the inconsumable for thinking.

Notes

1. All references to Keats's and Shelley's works are from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Bellknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978), and *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald. H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1977).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).
3. Aesthetic ideology is defined by a broad spectrum of aesthetic, philosophical, and political views; it would be difficult to properly delineate the architecture of de Man's concept here. However, the question of consumption and quasi-consumption is germane to aesthetic ideology; one might indeed view aesthetic ideology as based on "quasi-consumption."
4. In part for this reason Derrida relates consumption to what he calls "the metaphysics of presence," which may be defined in terms of quasi-consumption.
5. See Atheneus, *The Deipnosophists (Deipnosophistai)*, tr. Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1930), 96 (vol. 4, Books 8–10, (8.347e)).
6. See Arkady Plotnitsky, "All Shapes of Light: The Quantum Mechanical Shelley," in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Stuart Curran and Betty Bennett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 263–73.
7. This argument in part follows Derrida's analysis (*Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13–14).
8. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 289–90, 117.
9. A similar epistemology may apply to black holes. We may not be able to extend our customary conceptions of physical processes to what happens in those regions.
10. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958), 1.193.
11. See Derrida's analysis of Mallarmé in "The Double Session" in *Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
12. The situation may also be seen as corresponding to Hegel's epistemology and his argument for "the death of art" in his *Aesthetics*. On consumption in Hegel, I permit myself to refer to *In the Shadow of Hegel: Complementarity, History and the Unconscious* (Gainesville, Fla.: UP of Florida, 1983), and, on Bataille, "The Effects of the Unknowable: Materiality, Epistemology, and the General Economy of the Body in Bataille," *Parallax*, 18 (Winter 2001), 16–28.
13. See Derrida's analysis of Kant in "Economimesis," *Diacritics*, 11.3 (1981), 3–25.
14. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 82.
15. See Arkady Plotnitsky, "All Shapes of Light."
16. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–18.
17. See my "Algebra and Allegory: Nonclassical Epistemology, Quantum Theory and the Work of Paul de Man," in *Material Events*, ed. Barbara Cohen, Thomas Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, and Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 49–89; and *The Knowable and the Unknowable: Modern Science, Nonclassical Thought and the "Two Cultures"* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2002).
18. See *The Knowable and the Unknowable*.

19. Marcel Proust, "The Guermantes Way," *The Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1981), 3.64.
20. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
21. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 289–90.
22. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), 213–14.
23. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, tr. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 350.