Introduction

In a fragmentary essay of 1819, Shelley poses a question that had concerned him since the beginning of his career and would continue to preoccupy him until its end:

> What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered and our infancy remembered but in fragments. We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much. For what are we? Whence do we come, and whither do we go? Is birth the commencement, is death the conclusion of our being? What is birth and death? (*SPP*, p. 506)

In its movement from the initial posing of the question, to attempts to begin to address it, to recognition of the futility of such attempts and, at last, to renewed and proliferated questioning, the passage above hopes at best to 'make evident our ignorance to ourselves'. The three sentences following the opening question each seem to offer different ways of approaching it, but each, in fact, ends up distancing us further and further from being able to say what life is. First, Shelley offers what might be a way of characterising life – 'thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will' – as a starting point. But even though thoughts and feelings are said to arise either voluntarily or involuntarily, the fact that they 'arise', as if by some miasmic process, surreptitiously downplays their potential willed aspect and, moreover, hardly dispels the obscurity of their genesis. Evincing thoughts and feelings as characteristic of life would only seem, then, to deepen the mystery surrounding the initial enquiry. Shelley renews his attempt to establish some purchase on the question by turning back to what we might think of as the origin of life, namely, birth. Again, however, and even before Shelley asks whether birth is indeed the 'commencement' of our being, this turn to a putative origin enables little

progress to be made, since this origin has in fact sunk into oblivion, and, what is more, the period following birth is likewise unreliable as a source of information concerning the nature of life because of the friable, discrepant character of any recollection of it. Finally, the last of these three sentences is a remarkably concentrated consolidation of the sense that the course of life itself is inimical to the attempt to grasp what life might be. It is because we 'live on' that we are progressively (or regressively) distanced from the knowledge of life. 'What is life?' We cannot know because we live.

'We live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life.' This book is an extended reading of this statement. It is an 'extended reading' in the sense that it takes Shelley's concern with the opposition between 'living' and 'the apprehension of life' to be central to his work, from early poems like 'The Wandering Jew' and *Queen Mab* to the late and incomplete masterpiece 'The Triumph of Life', and from seemingly ephemeral fragmentary scrawls to *Prometheus Unbound*. In particular, I argue that Shelley does not merely acquiesce in the obliteration of 'the apprehension of life' by 'living'; on the contrary, his work is at once a profoundly informed, incisive critique of what might be called *mere* life and an attempt to bring the resources of poetic imagination to bear on the restoration of what he calls 'the apprehension of life'.

We can already see from the statement that 'in living we lose the apprehension of life' that 'living' and 'life' are, in Shelley's thinking, internally riven terms. That life is, so to speak, chequered is an insight hardly unique to Shelley, of course. Here is Keats's *Endymion*, for instance:

> But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
> The disappointment, the anxiety,
> Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
> All human; bearing in themselves this good,
> That they are still the air, the subtle food,
> To make us feel existence, and to show
> How quiet death is.[1]

Whereas for Keats, however, the negative aspects of human life nonetheless bear 'in themselves' the capacity to make us feel alive, it is those aspects of life that, for Shelley, in fact deaden us. Life is not so much characterised for him by events, actions and emotions that are at once clearly negative but at the same time enlivening; life is instead at war with itself. Laura Quinney captures this well when she remarks that Shelley's 'vocabulary is composed of words hovering around deeply antithetical uses'.[2] Quinney's remark is notable too, however, because it suggests that 'life' is

not the only one of Shelley's recurrent terms that is ambivalent: in fact, his whole vocabulary is constituted of just such terms. For instance, 'Power' in 'Mont Blanc' is, similarly to 'life', cast as potentiating and enervating, creative and destructive. Yet, even where the inaccessibility of power is considered in 'Mont Blanc', power itself does not weaken but ultimately abides aloof from the fray of mortal activity: it 'dwells apart in its tranquillity', whereas, faced with the consequences of power, there is by contrast no safe habitation for human beings: 'the race / Of man flies far in dread, his work and dwelling / Vanish like smoke' ('Mont Blanc' [Text B], *Poems* I, pp. 547, 548; ll. 97, 118–20). To be sure, like those of power, the effects of life upon human beings can certainly be ruinous, but in holding destructive sway over living beings, life is at the very same time destructive of itself. Life's frequent indifference to the living is not, for Shelley, a token of its serene majesty but rather of its own self-annihilation as well.

Life's relation with itself is thus central to Shelley's understanding of it. In an essay that in part addresses Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', Jacques Derrida claims with particular regard to 'living on' that '[l]iving on is not the opposite of living, just as it is not identical with living. The relationship', he goes on to say, 'is different, different from being identical, from the difference of distinctions – undecided, or, in a very rigorous sense, "vague".'[3] This identity and non-identity of 'living on' with living, astutely teased out in Derrida's reflections on the implications of what it means to live *on*, is one of the key focuses of this book. Indeed, it is instructive that the surviving manuscript of the essay in which Shelley makes the statement that is at the heart of this book is catalogued in the Pierpont Morgan Library under the title 'Life and the World: Autograph Manuscript of an Essay Written on the Leaves of a Note-Book'.[4] The opening sentence of the essay, from which the Pierpont Morgan catalogue entry takes its title, might suggest that Shelley's view of what is involved in the question 'What is life?' is already very diffusive, even culpably (rather than rigorously, as Derrida suggests) vague. 'Life, and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing' (*SPP*, p. 505). At best, it seems, Shelley has fallen victim to the astonishment to which he testifies, failing altogether to circumscribe the question of what life is and incapable even of defining its terms: he collapses right at the start into musing on 'whatever we call that which we are and feel'. John Middleton Murry, glossing Baudelaire's words, 'the deep significance of life reveals itself in its entirety', remarked, for example, that 'Life, in this phrase, means the universe of the writer's experience.'[5] 'Life', that is to say, is similar in usage to 'everything'. Likewise, in his study of those instances of 'life' used to

mean, as he disarmingly put it, 'what I like', C. S. Lewis commented, generously enough, that 'the use of *life* to mean whatever the speaker values is serviceable language […] *Life*, thus employed, is as useful a word as *good* or *nice*. The only danger is lest we should think it somehow more precise or scientific than they.'[6] In Shelley's case, it would seem that the imprecise and unscientific nature of the meaning of 'life' is due, in fact, to his deployment of it both for something he values – it is 'an astonishing thing' – and also for something the value of which is seriously open to question: it is life itself that causes the loss of its own apprehension.

One crucial attempt to rescue Shelley's understanding of life from the quandary into which it would seem to have mired itself has been the effort to recover his knowledge of what was indeed the scientific and increasingly precise account of life being developed around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Long ago, A. N. Whitehead argued for the importance of recognising the 'absorption of [Shelley's] mind in scientific ideas'.[7] Whitehead's emphasis on Shelley's knowledge of science was, of course, polemical and aimed at the disregard for his intellectual integrity displayed by his detractors and defenders alike. 'It is unfortunate', Whitehead wrote, 'that Shelley's literary critics have, in this respect, so little of Shelley in their mentality.' (By which he meant that their assessments of him were based on a dilatory treatment of the scientific aspects of his work.) 'They tend to treat as a casual oddity of Shelley's nature what was, in fact, part of the main structure of his mind, permeating his poetry through and through.'[8]

Of course, Romantic studies generally, and commentary on Shelley in particular, has developed in a number of different directions since Whitehead and his immediate followers. But it is worth emphasising that, as in Whitehead's work, the recently renewed focus on what has been called (in what is hoped to be a provocative move) 'Romantic science' has quite explicitly conceptualised and stressed its place in, and revision of, Romantic criticism.[9] Two aspects of this conceptualisation need to be drawn out with regard, in particular, to the Romantic understanding of 'life'. First, a number of important Romantic studies have aimed to recover the idea of organicism from post-structuralist strictures on it. In particular, it has been powerfully argued that the critique expounded and thence inspired by Paul de Man rests upon an oversimplified version of organic form that neglects or under-elaborates the complexities of the conceptualisation of the organic in a range of Romantic authorships.[10] Second, recent work on Shelley in particular has aimed to demonstrate his engagement with the controversy carried on between John Abernethy and

William Lawrence concerning the nature of vitality and thus has aimed more deeply to historicise Shelley's materialism. Sharon Ruston's *Shelley and Vitality* is paramount here, and she is especially interested in the political consequences of the 'vitality debate' in, for example, the implicit conservatism of Abernethy's reliance on an immaterial spirit as the basis for vitality versus the radicalism of Lawrence's more thoroughly physiological approach.[11]

The explicit emphasis on Shelley's knowledge of the emerging life sciences, found in Ruston's work, and the consequence of it for our understanding of his supposed materialism is supplemented by consideration of the significance of scientific thinking for Shelley's poetic practice, taking, for example, the assimilation of alien material by organisms – extensive consideration of which was central to theories of vitality – as a metaphor for the poetic process. Denise Gigante, in her account of Romanticism's 'epigenesist poetics', has advanced this interchange between science and poetry still further. Crucially, she views Romanticism's rejection of neoclassical standards as congruent with the realisation, intensified during the eighteenth century, that living beings accord not with a pre-established form but are instead characterised by their dynamic production of life from moment to moment.[12] Life and poetry alike are thus not conformable to a set of pre-given criteria but, instead, come to be and pass away constantly. Gigante offers a reading of Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas' in which she takes his 'vitalist "Witch"' to be an enactment of his epigenesist sense that '[w]hat was distinctive about poetic or metaphoric language […] was its capacity to sprout new relations, and from these, organic forms.'[13] In particular, '[v]italist poetry aims not to narrate but aesthetically to enact natura naturans', and, furthermore, the vital power taken to be embodied in the figure of the witch herself, an understanding of Shelley's engagement with science shows us, 'may be less a metaphysical abstraction than something he believed really to exist'.[14]

The strength of accounts such as Ruston's and, especially, Gigante's rests in their recognition of the interrelation of science, poetics and aesthetics, a recognition perhaps missing or, at least, insufficiently emphasised in earlier discussions of Shelley's knowledge of scientific theory.[15] I do still, nevertheless, have questions about the kind of account advanced by Ruston, which have to do, on the one hand, with the degree to which science is allowed (extensive apologias to the contrary notwithstanding) to dictate to poetry and, on the other, with a potential neglect of sources other than science for thinking about what 'life' means.[16] Moreover, my emphasis throughout this book is not on recovering a more nuanced

version of organicism as it might emerge from Shelley's work but rather on articulating what I want tentatively to call the *post-organic animism* that I see his poetry as evincing. The focus, then, of this articulation is neither on the place in Shelley's thinking of scientific theory nor even so much on the role of form (however 'open') but rather on the animistic investment of his verse in the sounds of particular words and letters. Poetry and 'life' are, in Shelley's work, mutually disclosing, and, thus, life is, in this book, neither an exclusively conceptual nor more broadly thematic concern but is rather a dynamic of poetic representation and performance itself.

In order to develop the reading of the interrelation between poetry and life sketched here, it will be necessary first of all to return in more detail to some of the ways in which my focus differs from other recent considerations of 'life' in Romantic studies. Therefore, Chapter 1 examines Shelley's conception of different theories of life as well as the ways in which that conception has been accounted for in approaches to his work in the twentieth century and more recently. And the minutiae of Shelley's verse composition, though they are pivotal throughout this book, are explicitly addressed in Chapters 4 and 5. At this point, however, I want to return to the apparently vague concept of life deployed in Shelley's 'On Life' – a vagueness, of course, that demonstration of his debt to science is meant to diffuse. The seeming vagueness of a locution such as 'life, or the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel' is due not, I would like to suggest, to a deplorably lax handling of terms but rather, on the contrary, to the fact that life is fundamental and prior to our perception of the world and is indeed all 'which we are and feel'. This is what Shelley means when, slightly later in 'On Life', he gives what can only provisionally be called a *definition* of life when he says 'Life – that which includes all' (*SPP*, p. 506). This is not a mere evasion of definition but a recognition that life is the inevitable basis of our perception of all things.

The consequences of the realisation that life 'includes all' are central to Chapter 5, where I examine the thought experiment in 'On Life' in which Shelley imagines an artist who 'merely conceived in his mind' of the cosmos and everything in it, 'these things', counterfactually, 'not before existing' (*SPP*, p. 505). But it is worthwhile here to attempt to specify still more fully why a view of 'life' as 'that which includes all', advanced by Shelley, does not fall prey to mere vagueness. Here, the revisionist phenomenology of the late Michel Henry is especially helpful in opening out what the force of 'life' might be in Shelley's thinking. Henry, in an important essay on 'what science does not know' (to which I will return briefly

in Chapter 1), lays out the corollaries of the methodological abstraction fundamental to modern science:

> In setting to one side the sensible qualities of the universe, the *blue* of the sky, the *green* of trees, the *serene* or menacing character of a landscape, the *sweetness* of odours, the *beauty* of forms – of old towns, or their horror in the monstrous suburbs of our time – [science] does not only eliminate the external aspect of objects that surround us but our very life. For it is indeed true, according to Descartes's brilliant intuition, that the sensations which result in the world giving itself to us under the appearance of a sensible world are not in the things but only in us, in our spirit. Things do not sense themselves, they are thus incapable of being hot, painful, sad, or serene. Only that which senses itself, that which internally feels itself can feel something such as heat or cold, suffering or joy. That which feels itself immediately, internally we call subjectivity or life – not biological life but life in the sense that everyone gives to this word in declaring, for example: life is short, life is sad, or, then again, as one of Maupassant's characters has it: 'Life is neither as good nor as bad as they say.'[17]

It is perhaps too infrequently recalled that, only a few sentences after making his notorious claim that '[i]f Shelley had been born a hundred years later, the twentieth century would have seen a Newton among chemists', Whitehead justly remarked that Shelley 'can simply make nothing of the doctrine of secondary qualities which is fundamental to [science's] concepts. For Shelley nature retains its beauty and its colour.'[18] Shelley holds this view in common, for instance, with Henry, and, in the above passage, what Henry wishes to recover from scientific reductionism is the meaning of a lived life rather than an objectified one. Accounts of life that miss out qualities such as these – and biology's understanding of life would, for Henry, be just such an account – are not really explanations *of life* at all. What Henry brings out, moreover, is that a description of life fully attentive to its shortness, sadness, goodness and badness will display a certain recalcitrance to settled definition. Life is fundamental – there is no available perspective outside of it, and it is thus prior to any understanding proffered by biology – but for that reason it can only provisionally be subjected to the kind of experimental objective scrutiny central to scientific investigation, since it is the foundation of such scrutiny. As Shelley puts it, life is, therefore, 'at once so certain and so unfathomable' (*SPP*, p. 505). This is not at all to say that Shelley simply came to reject the findings of the emerging life sciences; on the contrary, he was deeply excited and informed by them, as Ruston in particular amply testifies.[19] But it is to say that central to the kind of understanding of life that Shelley wishes consistently to pursue throughout his work is its indelibly

qualitative nature. Life is always felt to be – one might as well say life is always lived as – good or bad or indifferent – and indifference itself is an irreducibly qualitative aspect of life.

Whereas Henry's work can sometimes read as a paean to life, despite the acknowledgement that it can be 'sad', Shelley's, for all those moments where life is held up to be celebrated, shared and perpetuated, evinces a very strong sense that life is worryingly wrong. It is this sense that has often been taken to predominate in Shelley's understanding of 'life'. Writing in 1900, for instance, W. B. Yeats suggested that Blake, 'who for all his protest was glad to be alive', should be contrasted with Shelley, 'who hated life because he sought "more in life than any understood"'.[20] The quotation is a slight misremembering of the line from the first stanza of Shelley's late *ottava rima* lyric, 'The Zucca', where the speaker recalls the 'infant Winter', 'when I, desiring / More in this world than any understand, / Wept o'er the beauty, which, like sea retiring / Had left the earth bare' (Hutchinson, pp. 664–5; ll. 2, 3–6). As the quotation from 'The Zucca' already intimates, despite Yeats's assertion of Shelley's hatred of life, Shelley does not just reject life out of hand but desires 'more' in it than is routinely or easily comprehended. Central to 'The Zucca' is not so much dissatisfaction with life as such but rather with the fact that what passes for life too infrequently or only fleetingly is understandable as life at all: it is only for a moment that the mysterious 'I know not what' that the speaker 'loved' (l. 20) is 'not forbidden / To live within the life which thou bestowest' (ll. 29–30). What Shelley mourns here is that life is bestowed without, as it were, being animated. Shelley's hatred, such as it is, is not for life but for life that does not live.

The character of Shelley's understanding of life, therefore, is much more nuanced than Yeats would appear to allow. Richard Eldridge has endeavoured to explore the ramifications of this more than purely negative hatred of life. He quotes Thomas Mann's delineation of the difficulties involved in analysing the 'psychic state' at work in the background to Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Mann writes:

> A discontent with civilization, an emancipation of emotions, a gnawing yearning for a return to the natural and elemental, a shaking at the shackles of ossified culture, a revolt against convention and bourgeois confinement: everything converged to create a spirit that came up against the limitations of individuation itself, that allowed an effusive, boundless affirmation of life to take on the form of a death wish.[21]

Sweeping as Mann's portrayal of the late-eighteenth-century European 'discontent with civilization' is, its insight into the paradoxical rejection

of life motivated by an 'effusive, boundless affirmation' of it is nevertheless valuable. It is precisely because it is felt that life ought to be, in a word, good that its bad form is rejected. Perversely but understandably, under conditions in which life is not liveable, rejection of life comes to be the only authentically available action that is affirmative of life: 'it is all too plausible', comments Eldridge, 'that one might not only become melancholic but come to wish for nothing more than surcease, even to regard the taking of one's own life as the only possible creative act with a fixed endpoint, as the only meaningful act.'[22]

This specific rejection of life, rather than the otherworldly and general turn away from it diagnosed by Yeats, is strongly discernible in Shelley's writing. His concern with 'life' is as much a concern with what it ought to be as with what it is. For instance, at the height of one of those episodes of his life in which fraught emotion and high principle comingled – his quarrel with his erstwhile friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg over the latter's advances to Shelley's first wife, Harriet – Shelley wrote to Hogg, upbraiding his conduct and, significantly, arguing that life unqualified by certain ideals was not worth having:

> Prove to me satisfactorily that Virtue exists not, that it is a fabric as baseless as a school-boy's vision, then take life. I will no more with it. I would not consent to live to breathe to vegetate, if this vegetation simply went on to imbibe for no other end than it's [*sic*] own proper nutriment the juices which surrounded it. – Does the vegetable reason as to the good it does to the air when it absorbs azote, does the panther destroy the antelope for the public good, does the lion love the lioness for his sake or her own. Prove that Man too is necessarily this; my last act may be an act of this very selfishness but it would be an act of precluding the possibility of more of it, or I would leave the world to such as could bear to inhabit it's [*sic*] surface. (?14 November 1811, *Letters* I, pp. 179–80)[23]

Shelley perhaps insinuates that it is Hogg's infatuation with Harriet which is itself 'as baseless as a school-boy's vision', and thus as wretchedly unrealistic as the kind of onanistic fantasy that that phrase hints at. But the interest of this letter is more than merely biographical and lies rather in its description of a life unqualified by (here) 'Virtue' as frankly unliveable. The above passage successively downgrades the kind of existence conceivable were virtue indeed shown to be fatuous: 'I would not consent *to live to breathe to vegetate*, if this vegetation simply went on to imbibe for no other end than it's own proper nutriment the juices which surrounded it.' Life without virtue is aimlessly enduring vegetation, and those Shelley would leave behind were virtue not to exist would merely 'inhabit [the

world's] surface', just eating and excreting like plants similarly rooted to the ground, their capacity to tolerate doing so the result not of a virtue such as forbearance but of inertia.

It is tempting to write off the episode of the break with Hogg as the tempestuous and faintly comical consequence for a highly charged adolescent friendship of ill-conceived moral experimentalism. We would be wrong to do so, however, if only for the reason that friendship, for Shelley, is one significant quality that makes life liveable. The imagination of true friendship as the mutually sustaining dissolution of two parties into one another is central to Chapter 4's consideration of the portrayal of the sorority between Ione and Panthea, which is performed on the most intimate level of the fabric of their speech. Without love, life becomes its own tomb, a tomb which does not merely contain what has gone dead but perpetuates it, horrifyingly, as a perverse form of living, for, as the essay 'On Love' has it, '[s]o soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what he once was' (*SPP*, p. 504). The importance of this investment in friendship is also discernible, for example, in Shelley's translation of the *Symposium*. In a thorough overview of Shelley's 'mistranslations' from Plato's Greek and their consequences, Stephanie Nelson discusses Shelley's struggles with the contrast between *huperapothanein* and *epapothanein*, a contrast by which Diotima stresses that Achilles not only died for Patroclus in the way one might for a friend still alive (*huperapothanein*) but rather died for him even though Patroclus himself was already dead (*epapothanein*). Nelson's view of this translational difficulty is that 'Shelley's solution is to ignore the problem' and, instead, to emphasise that 'the gods honor Achilles because he dared not "to die for him merely, but to disdain and reject that life which he had ceased to share"'.[24] Yet, contrary to what Nelson suggests, it is not quite the case that Shelley simply sidesteps the particular conundrum for translation here; rather, what he chooses to call attention to is that Achilles comes to abhor a life that can no longer be characterised by the fact that it is shared with his friend. For Achilles, life has ceased to be liveable *for him* because it is no longer lived *by Patroclus*.[25]

What each of these examples – the letter to Hogg and the translation of Diotima's reflection on Achilles' sacrifice for his friend – brings into view is that life, for Shelley, is never straightforwardly or immutably life if it is just living on, if it is just, that is to say, mere enduring. His hatred of life, alleged by Yeats, is thus no simple rejection of life for the sake of something other than life. Shelley is an enemy of life for the sake of its realisation; he hates life, that is, lived under conditions of suffering, injustice