

Staring into the Abyss: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "On Life" Through A Lacanian Lens

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Percy Bysshe Shelley's "On Life", a short essay penned on the back of his longer work *A Philosophical View of Reform*, focuses on language's role in creating a person's reality and the impediments associated with linguistic knowledge. This work is remarkably similar to the later psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and his work on the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real. Both Shelley and Lacan address the learning of language to be the separation between intimate worldly experiences and ideologically based knowledge. Shelley's "mist of familiarity" resembles Lacan's Real, while other likenesses between the authors allows Lacan's detailed theory to help decipher Shelley's ideas about language (Shelley 1). First, a greater explanation of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory will be contextualized for the scope of this essay. Then, Lacan's work will be applied to Shelley's "On Life" to reveal the weight behind his ideas about humans and language. Through this translation, the text suggests that "the mist of familiarity" produced by language creates a habitual relation of disregard, which propels humans towards a "dark abyss" where life's essence risks being snared by language (Shelley 1,3).

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is consistently used to critique human's approach to language and reality. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lisa Tyson introduces Lacan's work as emerging from classic psychoanalytic theory and the idea of the conscious and unconscious. Lacan's theory begins at the onset of life, as the infant enters what he refers to as the "mirror stage", when the infant encounters their image in a mirror, thus framing their consciousness. (Tyson 26). Human's experience of the world before the mirror stage is indistinguishable from the environment around them—we perceive ourselves as a part of the

world. This is a world of images supplied through sensual perception, which Lacan refers to as the Imaginary Order (Tyson 28).

In the Imaginary Order, the child has yet to learn of language's empirical qualities and believes the surrounding mass is connected to their body. However, language begins their transfer into the Symbolic Order and the child begins applying linguistic symbols to the world (Tyson 28). The Symbolic becomes a separation from physicality and a movement to ideological associations of language, creating a dissociation that Tyson describes as “...always seeking ways to put into words the world of objects we inhabit as adults, objects that didn’t need words when we felt, as preverbal infants, one with them” (29). Through the empirical categorization of language, abstractions are assigned to nature for comprehension within the Symbolic Order.

Both the Symbolic and the Imaginary attempt to control what Lacan calls the Real, which is the essence of the world outside of human ideological infrastructure. As Tyson discusses, “...we experience the real when we have a moment in which we see through ideology, when we realize that it is ideology—and not some set of timeless values or eternal truths—that has made the world as we know it” (31). Human acceptance of this—Lacan’s “trauma of the Real”—acknowledges that the production of the constructs in our society are fabrications and have no substantial meaning other than our ideological faith (Tyson 30). Despite the extremely similar features between Shelley’s earlier essay and Lacan’s theory, their ideas of what compromises the *Real* is where the two thinkers separate, with both addressing a paramount issue within human life.

Shelley’s “On Life” can be broken down into stages resembling Lacan’s Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, which facilitate a translation of Shelley’s ideas into a comprehensible format. For example, Shelley also recognized that children’s perception of the world without

language is dependent upon their physical place: “We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt, from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass” (Shelley 2).

Through language humans simultaneously *learn about* and *disengage from* the world around us. A connection to life without language is pure, as the adoption of language brings about mechanical and habitual patterns of socially constructed reasoning. These modes are abstract in nature, adapted and applied to the thoughts and feelings we experience to assimilate the myriad sensual encounters into a state like Lacan's Symbolic. Once we learn what an object is, it becomes familiar, thus having a “sign” of language applied by our categorization of learning (Shelley 2).

However, Shelley believes language detracts from an entities’ substance, which is now described not by what the entity *is*, but by what it is *named*. This ultimately leads to a perpetual state of identification with insurmountable boundaries dictated by language.

Shelley refers to this segregation of humans and experience as an “...education of error” (2).

Shelley sees language creating signs and separate ideas for nature that are layered upon our world. For example, Shelley says: “any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with an apprehension of distinction” (3). This is related to Lacan’s Real, as Shelley’s idea of layered meanings resembles Lacan's ideas of society's ideological frameworks building upon one another. Yet, the massive amount of language humans acquire rips away many of their experiences, beginning with those of birth and infancy and continuously compounding throughout their lives.

This state of indifference, which Shelley calls the “mist of familiarity”, resembles a sort of muscle memory humans create while relying on language for understanding (Shelley 1). At a deeper level, the “mist of familiarity” is a conditioned obscurity of categorizing the multitude of experiences in our lives while ignoring the traumatic separation implemented by

language (Shelley 1). This state of symbol usage deteriorates physical experience and traps humans into an idea that linguistic knowledge offers comprehension of life. Yet, Shelley felt that life is incomparably amazing, surpassing our abilities of awareness and requiring a compulsive system of organization through language (Shelley 1). Without the “mist of familiarity”, the possibility of recognizing beauty in life would be impossible due to the overwhelming level of occurrences humans encounter daily.

Furthermore, Shelley complicates matters by introducing a “dark abyss” that humans confront, which can greater be conceptualized utilizing Lacan's Real (3). In the discovering of life's perplexities, Shelley believes humans become frightened using linguistic tools to describe the world while simultaneously detracting life's grandeur. Shelley describes this dilemma in the following: “We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know!” (3). In other words, the greater we expand our knowledge, the further we separate ourselves from the world and hover above that “dark abyss” (Shelley 3). Shelley's trauma places subject between the complacent comforts of habitual actions—the “mist of familiarity”—and the “dark abyss” of acquiring knowledge (Shelley 1, 3).

The idea of using language to understand life is problematic for Shelley, especially with the possibility of slipping into the “mist of familiarity” (1). Shelley addresses language specifically by saying: “How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being! Rightly used they make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much” (1). Shelley recognizes language's oversights but ignores language's role as a cipher to understand the world. Without language as a key, humans would be incapable of inscribing meaning on experience. Yet, Shelley saw this learning process as a conscious disconnection from the world where language supplies the knowledge of our ignorant separation from life's

meaning. The irony is that without learning language, which creates the barrier between human and experience Shelley is describing, we would never know such a barrier exists.

Just as humans become programmed by the Symbolic in Lacan's work, Shelley believes this same entanglement occurs with the "mist of familiarity" (1). For Lacan, the Imaginary and the Real exist between the folds of reality. But for Shelley, the "mist of familiarity" and the "dark abyss" are the two extremes offered by human's search for understanding. As one cannot fully function within society while inhabiting Lacan's Imaginary, neither can one exist outside of language in Shelley's perception of life. Therefore, entering the Symbolic, or succumbing to the "mist of familiarity", is the conformist function one must perform if they wish to coexist alongside other humans.

The parallels between Shelley and Lacan's ideas are uncanny. Both thinkers envision language as symbols that sever humans from the world, or a state where they must relinquish individual control. Yet, unlike Lacan's Real flashing in glimpses, Shelley posits humans between the disassociating "mist of familiarity" and the "dark abyss" of continued education without possibility of comprehension (Shelley 1, 3).

As this essay was never finished, it is not certain if Shelley ever returned to further develop these claims. But in this short work, Shelley vehemently calls for an awareness of the defamiliarizing aspects of language, an application of a Romantic lens in viewing the world, and a recognition of the sublime nature of life itself (1).

Works Cited

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Tyson, Lisa. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. Routledge Press, 2015.