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Cyclical Consumption and Immortality in *Ode to the West Wind*

Tuberculosis, known to many as ‘consumption’, undoubtedly consumed the cultural landscape of the 19th century. The imagery of a pale slow death— rosy cheeks, sunken eyes, and hollow bones beneath cold skin— is pervasive in the era’s literature, art, and culture. People did not realize that tuberculosis is bacterial; instead, it was believed to be genetic, divine, or carried by wind and bad air—yet regardless, inevitable. As such, tuberculosis, 'the white death', began to embody death itself—a god of the harvest sweeping through with the vicissitude of the seasons, reaping victims in predictable cycles. It is the disease of the seasons: one would contract the illness in the Winter’s close quarters, briefly recuperate in Spring and Summer’s warmth, and finally Autumn’s winds and rains would herald death— or, for those who survived, incapacitation and suffering. Percy Bysshe Shelley himself experienced illness in 1817, and though it wreaked havoc on him— as it did so many others— he described ‘unnatural and keen excitement’ where ‘the very blades of grass and the boughs of distant trees present themselves...with microscopical distinctness’ Two years later, he wrote an ode to the wind that carries such disease. In this *Ode to the West Wind,* Shelley uses tuberculosis's seasonal cycle as an extended conceit to show that consumption creates corporeal suffering, that this suffering inspires creative consciousness and transforms one into instruments, and that death scatters the sufferer’s thoughts as prophetic seeds, enabling cyclical immortality.

Physicians had long observed that tuberculosis patients displayed unusual mental states, in which creativity would be spurred greatly. By the Romantic era, this phenomenon was termed *spes phthisica*—hope of the consumptive—describing a euphoric creativity that emerged as the

body came to waste. Further, Romantics believed this heightened sensibility was the source of artistic genius, often prophetic and God-sent. Shelley experienced this pestilence wrought creativity firsthand. Shelley knew he was consumptive long before he wrote *Ode to the West Wind* and made note of this in an 1817 letter stating, “I have experienced a decisive pulmonary attack...this symptom sufficiently shows the true nature of my disease to be consumption." While he expressed the increased creativity, he could not discover its source, using words such as ‘unnatural’ to describe it, or saying that beauty in the mundane ‘revealed’ itself to him. This of course lines up neatly with the ‘peculiar’ description physicians attributed to *spes phtisica*, and its otherworldly nature. Such as the disease itself, these sparks also ebbed and flowed with the months, which Percy expresses, noting “my feelings at intervals are of a deadly and torpid kind, or awakened”. These intervals, and the disease, all shift in line with the seasons; both in actual physical impacts of the disease, as well as the day-to-day experience of its victims. When discussing tuberculosis in Of the Epidemics, one of the first written accounts of the disease, Hippocrates said the following:

> During winter, paraplegia set in, and attacked many, and some died speedily… Early in the spring, ardent fevers commenced and continued through the summer until the equinox. Those then that were attacked immediately after the commencement of the spring and summer, for the most part recovered, and but few of them died. But when the autumn and the rains had set in, they were of a fatal character, and the greater part then died. (Hippocrates 2)

The cold of the winter worsens the illness, freezing, confining, and in many cases killing. This was true in 400 B.C.E, and stayed true through time. In August 1820, John Keats put it

rather plainly in a letter to Shelley: “There is no doubt that an English winter would put an end to me and do so in a lingering hateful manner.” Understanding consumptions oscillating with nature's seasonal cycles, both in pain and in passion firsthand, Shelley opens 'Ode to the West Wind' by establishing Autumn's leaves as diseased multitudes entering this cyclical pattern of death, scattering seeds, and new buds growing in: death and rebirth.

The poem opens establishing the West Wind as Autumn’s breath and describes the leaves that it drives from its trees. These leaves are carried by the wind, and the idea of a *carrying* wind is a constant motif in the poem. Shelley establishes this motif in these first few lines: “thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.”[1] In addition to the parallel drawn from dead leaves to dead people (ghosts), he furthers this tie to humanity when he references the four humours, which are distinctly human. Shelley, describing the “Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red” [2] of the leaf’s; parallels that of the four humours, respectively: yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood. In the next line, he directly refers to the leaves as “pestilence-stricken multitudes.” [3] Confounded with the common definition of hectic blood, a Grecian diagnosis of Tuberculosis, the identity of this pestilence is clear.

It’s imperative to once again recall that the pestilence-stricken leaves are not just people, but *also* their components; just as the humours are not people, but simply components of them. However riddled with conceit the poem is, it helps to imagine an individual as a forest unto themselves, with health and consciousness being the sum of one’s foliage. The leaves are

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[1] Lines 2-3
[2] 4
[3] 5

simultaneously literal autumn leaves, physical representations of tuberculosis victims, and their consciousness, legacy, and ideas. This gets rather heavy and dense, but what matters is that Shelley has established these leaves as diseased, victims of the humors, whether that leaf seen as a person or an iota of one. It's akin to melting iron shavings as opposed to melting an iron skillet— regardless, it will result in a sum of iron.

Further, Shelley makes clear that these victims are carried by the wind's "unseen presence." Yet these pestilence-stricken leaves are carried from their role as sufferer to seed, as the decay progresses:

> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
>
> The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
>
> Each like a corpse within its grave.[4]

These human leaves are suddenly simultaneously "winged seeds", yet just as the winged seeds helicopter to the Earth and lack the ability to generate any force on their own, so too do these human-seeds lack agency. The wings are there to facilitate the wind to carry and scatter them in the Autumn; yet once landed they simply *imply* flight. The seeds lie cold and incapacitated in their earthen and snow-laden bed, "each like a corpse within its grave", passively awaiting something to awaken them. Fortunately, Shelley informs us that they will only being waiting "until / Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow / Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth…",[5] with "thine azure sister" translating directly to 'your azure sister', meaning the West Wind of the

[4] Lines 6-8
[5] Lines 8-10

Spring. This is vital in both establishing the dual nature of the West Wind— through the juxtaposing environmental processes of Autumn and Spring— as well as introducing the first *instrument,* the clarion—as a revitalizing and vernal force.

The West Wind of Spring plays a clarion over the 'dreaming earth', yet what does it mean for the earth to dream? The dreams are that of the human seeds, laid by the prior Autumn decay. And these dreams are realized, detailing their eventual bursting from the earth:

> When the clarion sounds, it will 'fill
>
> (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
>
> With living hues and odours plain and hill.[6]

The 'sweet buds' are those with youth, driven by wind just as the dead leaves were driven. But crucially, these buds 'feed in air', they consume what the wind carries, feeding on the scattered collective of those who decayed. The world is filled once again with life. Bounded by the labyrinth-like parallels of this extended conceit, a complex network reveals how Shelley's cyclical immortality operates: the consumed person's thoughts scatter as seeds, buds emerge and feed on those airborne ideas, and the consciousness of the dead germinates within the living. Eventually, just as the seasons imply, these buds will become the leaves, engaging the two cycles. The consumed scatters as both physical matter and consciousness. Both lie passive through Winter (in death or paraplegia); both need Spring's clarion to actualize their potential.

[6] Lines 11-12

This entirely solidifies the seasonal pattern: Autumn scatters and sends the foliage to its wintry bed, Winter holds dormant or kills, Spring awakens.

At last, the dual nature of the singular Spirit, that being the West Wind, is explicitly defined: "Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear."[7] These lines, reveal that destruction and preservation are simply the same action viewed at different points in the cycle. The wind is free and breathes regardless of if it is autumnal or vernal; all that changes is death and rebirth of leaves, scattering and bloom seeds. As destruction and preservation are the same, they are undoubtedly equally paramount to the cyclical immortality Shelley defines in this ode. Dual nature does not mean two natures, but that its singular nature has separate and contrasting properties. Universal is the most apt word to describe this disposition, and Shelley in Section III of the poem reveals that this same force operates across all of nature, proving its universality. He is explicit in stating that what the wind does to leaves on land, it also does to vegetation in the ocean. The pattern holds through all the foliage the wild spirit moves.

The section starts with notably peaceful imagery:

> Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
>
> The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
>
> Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams[8]

[7] Lines 13-14
[8] Lines 29-31

The West Wind carries a chaotic storm—which is likened to the flowing hair on a Maenad—which awakens the blue Mediterranean come Autumn. This is the preserver's face, the spirit that breathes movement back into what has been lulled by crystalline stillness; the preserver is just as chaotic and free. The wind acts as inspiration to the Mediterranean to awaken. Yet as the stanza deepens, Shelley's focus shifts beneath the surface, and the wind's destructive face reveals itself. The "sapless foliage of the ocean"[9] mirrors the "pestilence-stricken multitudes" of leaves on land; both are vegetation drained of life, both tremble and "despoil themselves"[10] at the wind's command. The underwater plants "grow gray with fear,"[11] as even the ocean's depths cannot shield from the wild spirit's reach. Shelley thus unites the terrestrial and the marine, beneath one vast motion of decay and scattering. Especially with the imagery used, one can see a clear parallel to the West Wind of Homeric mythos. In the Odyssey (IV.637–639), the West Wind is gentle and sustaining, the "breezes, singing winds of the West refreshing all mankind" that flow eternally over the Elysian fields. Yet in the Iliad (IX.4–6), the same wind becomes violent, joining the North Wind to "blast out of Thrace in sudden, lightning attack," chopping the sea into a "tangled mass of seaweed." Whether scattering terrestrial leaves or distributing ocean foliage, the West Wind acts the same regardless. Having observed this wild spirit's power over leaves and ocean, the speaker in Section IV identifies himself as one of the diseased leaves, uses vivid imagery displaying the first-hand experience of decay, and recognizing that only through this consumptive decay can he enter the cycle he has described.

Banishment to a bed, and the expansive physical destruction from Tuberculosis has been more than defined within the leaves, and in this section the speaker makes a persona l plea to the

[9] Line 40
[10] 42
[11] 39

wind because of this suffering. “If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear”[12], he says, wishing to be carried and next wishes to be a wave ‘panting’ beneath the winds power. This is his plea, to be a companion to the wind— yet he also recognizes that if he were not suffering, he would never wish to be carried and scattered in this way. He says:

> If even
>
> I were as in my boyhood, and could be
>
> The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
>
> As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
>
> Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven
>
> As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need[13]

If even he were young and free, healthy he would never implore the wind. If he could simply walk under the wind, enjoy the Autumn and Spring alike, he would never have desired to enter this cycle as he does now in his decay. Only now, in "sore need," does he desire to join with the force that destroys, so he could be preserved. This paradox embodies spes phthisica: the consumptive's hope that only emerges through disease. Health does not want death; only the dying desire to become the destroying wind, or to be carried by it. Consumption creates the transformative longing that health could never produce. Then comes the physical collapse: "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"[14] The exclamation marks punctuate the violence and pain—

[12] Line 43
[13] 47-52
[14] Line 54

piercing as it is. "Fall" suggests sudden loss of control, the body giving way. "Bleed" is unambiguous. This is not metaphorical suffering but corporeal reality: the speaker is literally bleeding, experiencing the physical breakdown that Hippocrates described and that Shelley knew from his 1817 "decisive pulmonary attack." The "thorns of life" pierce him, and his body betrays him with blood. This moment proves the first claim of the thesis: consumption creates corporeal suffering, real and painful and undeniable.

The stanza closes with: "A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd / One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud."[15] What was once like wind, has chain'd and bow'd; he is weighed down from time, burdened. Chain suggests that a part of this decay is imprisonment, which suggests the confinement wrought by consumption Hippocrates noted. The contrast between his youth and diseased state emphasizes the corporeal destruction tuberculosis has cast upon him. Section IV thus establishes the speaker as one of the pestilence-stricken multitudes, and thus his ideas and revealing both his physical suffering and the paradoxical desire it creates. He bleeds, he falls, he is bowed by time's weight—yet this very suffering generates the strange hope (spes phthisica) that drives him to pray for transformation. Only through this corporeal reality can he move toward the creative and prophetic transformation promised in the next section.

Rather than lamenting his decaying body, the speaker petitions to become the wind's instrument, "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is." [16]The lyre is just an instrument played by the wind; he wants to inspire the tune of the winds harmonies and let the wind carry it. Just as the

[15] 55-56
[16] Line 57

forest's leaves decay and fall, he too is stripped bare by illness, yet instead of resisting, he offers himself to the same consuming force. The lyre, strung from dying material, depends upon tension and decay to produce music. In Greek myth, Hermes crafts the first lyre from a dead tortoise— "Living, you shall be a spell against mischievous witchcraft; but if you die, then you shall make sweetest song" (Homeric Hymn to Hermes IV.28). Death itself becomes the condition of harmony in the first lyre, and thus it is the condition of harmony in the speaker's case as well. His own body, wasting from consumption, becomes the shell upon which the wind plays. The next line deepens this identification and enforces the human to forest, leaves to idea, conceit: "What if my leaves are falling like its own!"[17] The "what if" implies hope, acceptance of decay rather than fear. The poet's humors, the very fluids that betray him, now align with the humors of the natural world; his collapse is not an aberration but a necessary function in the cycle. This embrace of bodily dissolution embodies the paradox of spes phthisica and allows him to scatter his leaves, his thoughts and writings will be preserved through this cycle. The wind "will take from both a deep, autumnal tone, sweet though in sadness,"[18] from the forest and the speaker's decay, the harmonies of the wind will carry with it their tone. Thus, the speaker's suffering proves to be generative, which allows him to take solace in entering this cycle. His suffering transforms him to instrument.

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[17] 58
[18] 60

And yet still his journey is not over. The speaker makes one last request to the wind, to "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!*"*[19] he pleads. The echo of "drive" recalling the poem's first lines, binding the speaker's fate to that of the pestilence-stricken multitudes. His "dead thoughts" are the remnants of consciousness left and inspired by the consumption which has destroyed the body. Yet these remnants, like leaves offer renewal. The simile "like wither'd leaves" beyond a shadow of a doubt confirms that he becomes one of the diseased multitudes, the fallen leaves now transformed into winged seeds. But the addition "to quicken a new birth" signals the culmination of Shelley's conceit. Death is no longer mere destruction; it is generative. The same disease that decays the body ensures the germination of consciousness elsewhere. Shelley then makes the scattering of ideas explicit, stating:

> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
>
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind![20]

The transformation reaches its summit when he implores, "Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!"[21] The wind, which first used him as a lyre and creating the prophetic thoughts through his decay. Now finds passage through him; his lips, pale and stricken, become the instrument's mouthpiece. And despite his lungs which bled, which famously leads to consumptive patients being unable to speak, through death and writing he's preserved. The "unawaken'd earth" mirrors "dreaming earth," completing the cycle. The poet

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[19] Lines 63-64
[20] 65-67
[21] 68-69

who once was awakened by Spring's clarion now becomes that clarion for others. His body, once the lyre of decay producing and scattering ideas, becomes the trumpet of awakening.

Through the clarion, the lyre, and the trumpet, Shelley demonstrates the cycle of decay and renewal. The clarion of Spring awakens what the Autumn wind has buried; the lyre of Autumn transforms suffering into song; and the trumpet of prophecy scatters that song into future generations. Each instrument marks a phase of the same consumptive process In Ode to the West Wind, just as the wind has two natures, but is one process. The same force that withers the leaves and rots the lungs also carries their essence forward. Through the clarion, lyre, and trumpet, Shelley transforms personal affliction into an entryway to the seasons. The final line "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"[22] is phrased as a question, but unless something rather unfortunate happens, it is a universal truth. It fully establishes that if death comes, the speaker eagerly anticipates the renewal that will come. This is the culmination of spes phthisica born of consumption itself, the hope that it will bring with it 'sparks.' Through consumptive suffering in Autumn leaves are carried to ground, death in winter buries them, awaiting the spring to awaken them; the seasons operating in cycles, and the people and songs born from them, carried by wind just as the leaves, and the cyclical immortality this creates are proved far and beyond through this extended conceit.

[22] Line 70

Note: All letters taken from "Shelley Memorials: From Authentic Sources"

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