SHELLEY'S USE OF METEMPSYCHOSIS IN
THE REVOLT OF ISLAM

The introductory canto of *The Revolt of Islam* has long been a problem to scholars. It would appear that Shelley purposely sought obscurity, and that he did not connect this section with the remainder of the poem. Yet when we examine others of his poems, we cannot find such a glaring weakness in structure as is here seemingly exhibited. It may be that he did become too involved in symbolic expression in this canto. Thus, Professor White says,

The principal weakness of the poem is structural. The first canto, including a kind of survey of the French Revolution and a partly symbolical explanation of Shelley’s philosophy of good and evil, is far too elaborate an introduction to a story.¹

Clutton-Brock finds the same fault with the introduction and extends it to the entire poem, which he finds perplexing in its vagueness.

In this strange introduction Shelley shows an utter contempt for or ignorance of the story teller’s art. The reader is perplexed at the outset, and his patience exhausted before the hero and heroine appear. Shelley tries to make a myth; but its significance is lost in descriptions, wonderful but vague. The introduction lacks substance, and there is the same fault all through the poem.²

There is no indication, however, that Shelley doubted the clarity of his introduction, and when we examine it in the light of certain passages in the following cantos, this first section becomes more meaningful.

The relationship between the introduction and the main body of the work seems to be suggested in two vague stanzas which come at the close of the first canto. The poet has witnessed the struggle between the Eagle and the Serpent,
in which the Eagle was victorious; he has seen how the Woman, "beautiful as morning," protected the Serpent; he has heard the strange story which the Woman told as they voyaged in the little boat; and now at last he has been brought to a temple "likest Heaven." The poet and the Woman, who carries the Serpent "coiled in rest in her embrace," enter the temple and go to the hall where sit the "Great who had departed from mankind, a mighty senate." One seat is vacant—a throne. As the Woman enters the hall she "shrieks the spirit's name," sinks to the floor, and vanishes slowly from sight. Supernatural darkness supplants her. The poet describes what next occurs in the following manner:

Then first, two glittering lights were seen to glide
In circles on the amethystine floor,
Small serpent eyes trailing from side to side,
Like meteors on a river's grassy shore,
They round each other rolled, dilating more
And more—then rose, commingling into one,
One clear and mighty planet hanging o'er
A cloud of deepest shadow, which was thrown
Awhart the glowing steps and the crystalline throne.

The cloud which rested on that cone of flame
Was cloven; beneath the planet sate a Form,
Fairer than tongue can speak or thought may frame,
The radiance of whose limbs rose-like and warm
Flowed forth, and did with softest light inform
The shadowy dome, the sculptures, and the state
Of those assembled shapes—with clinging charm
Sinking upon their hearts and mine. He sate
Majestic, yet most mild—calm, yet compassionate.3
(I, lv-i-lvii.)

The poet is supported by a hand whose strength is magic. A voice tells him that he must be a listener to the tale—a "tale of human power." He looks and sees a figure of eloquent beauty, and there is one who sits beside him who is "far lovelier." These two whom the poet sees are Laon
Metempsychosis in *The Revolt of Islam* and Cythna, the hero and heroine of the poem. Laon speaks, and by him henceforth the tale is told. Thus ends Canto I.

By reading the last few stanzas of Canto XII, it can be seen that the realm to which Laon and Cythna are wafted after death is meant to be the same as the temple in the first canto; and the little boat which moves through the water so mysteriously in Canto XII is the one in which the poet and the Woman make their journey in the introduction. Even the description of the voyage is similar in both cantos. Most scholars make this identification.

It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the two enigmatic stanzas quoted above, but in view of what is to follow in this discussion it seems logical to assume that the Serpent is transformed into Laon and the Woman into Cythna. It is Laon and Cythna in the forms of the Serpent and the Woman of Canto I, who have assumed new forms after death in order to visit earth again, possibly to renew their struggle with their old enemy, and certainly to obtain a listener to whom they can tell the story of their first battle with evil.

A quotation from Carl Grabo’s *Magic Plant* shows that he was aware of Shelley’s use of metempsychosis here; however, Mr. Grabo merely mentions the fact and offers no proof of his statement:

> But the Lady and the Serpent are transformed, the throne is occupied, seemingly by a dual spirit, male and female, which had been the Serpent and Lady and are now one. Then the male aspect of the divinity steps forth and tells the tale of his experiences on earth when, as a divided spirit, as Laon and Cythna, he—or they—took on human form, labored to improve the lot of man, and suffered martyrdom.

The mystical implications of these incidents are apparent but not easily interpreted, for they suggest experiences—dreams and imaginings—not to be wholly rationalized. The conception of a hall of immortals, a Valhalla of the intellect, to which go the spirits of earth and whence they return at
need, taking on earthly forms, is one to be found in Theosophy, in neo-Platonism, and variously in the writings of the mystics.¹

Such is the point at which this discussion aims, and, by identifying Laon with the Serpent and Cythna with the Lady of Canto I, I hope to show Shelley’s use of reincarnation in the development of the structure of the poem.

“In many respects [The Revolt of Islam] was a genuine picture of my own mind.”⁴ Thus Shelley wrote of this narrative poem, and this statement characterizes much of his poetry. His characters are, in most cases, projections of his own mind. We can see Shelley in the faery of Queen Mab and in each of the characters fighting on the side of Right in The Revolt of Islam.

As in “The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” so in the Dedication to this poem, we have an account of the poet’s pledging himself to truth, justice, and freedom, and along with this dedication a statement that he grows weary

The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
Without reproach or check.
(Dedication, IV, 33-35.)

These words are Shelley’s own, spoken by himself, not by one of his characters. Yet similar words might have been spoken by Laon, Cythna, the Woman “beautiful as morning,” or by the old man of Canto IV, for these people are all projections of Shelley’s own mind. It was the poet’s constant task to “scatter [his] words among mankind,” and Laon, Cythna, and other characters in this and other poems are media chosen for that purpose. In this sense Shelley’s characters are all autoproductions and hence are all one person.⁶a One might say, therefore, that Shelley made use of metempsychosis in creating each of his characters. The use which he made of the motif in this poem, however, is entirely apart from that of
character unification; he employed the device here as a means of developing the structure of his poem.

Let us look first at some of Shelley’s reading to see if there is anything in it which would cause his mind to turn to the metempsychosis motif as a structural medium. There are, naturally, any number of places in which he could have found theories of reincarnation. I wish to call to mind only two such references.

In his article on the source of *The Revolt of Islam* Kenneth Cameron has shown that Shelley was familiar with Volney’s *Ruins*. By pointing out many verbal parallels, he develops the idea that Shelley must have read the work in an English translation. In regard to the possible time at which Shelley read this work, he says, “In fact, Shelley’s debt to the work in *The Revolt of Islam* is of so extensive a nature that it is clear he must have reread it shortly before or even during the composition of the poem.” The parallels which Cameron points out are so striking that they cannot be ignored. Therefore, we must accept his major premise and admit Shelley’s debt to Volney.

In showing where Shelley could have obtained the idea of representing one of the two contesting powers as a serpent, he quotes the following passage from Volney:

> At a later period in Persia, it [the power of evil] was the serpent; who under the name of Ahriman, formed the basis of the system of Zoroaster; and it is the same, O Christians and Jews, that has become your serpent of Eve (the celestial virgin) and that of the cross; in both cases it is the emblem of Satan, the enemy and great adversary of the Ancient of Days, sung by Daniel.

In order to complete his surmise, Cameron adds the following passage taken from a footnote in Volney:

> ‘The Persians,’ says Chardin, ‘call the constellation of the Serpent Ophiucus, Serpent of Eve; and this serpent Ophiucus
or Ophionesus plays a similar part in the theology of the Phoenicians; for Pherecydes, their disciple and the master of Pythagoras, said that Ophionesus Serpentinus had been chief of the rebels against Jupiter.*

According to Cameron this passage would account for Shelley’s perverse use of the serpent as a symbol of good, for, in rebelling against Jupiter, it would be a good and not an evil spirit.

As they stand, these two passages are of little interest to us. Between these quotations, however, separated from each by only a few pages, occurs a lengthy discourse on metempsychosis, which Shelley would have seen as he read the work. In view of his own religious philosophy it would have been of the greatest interest to him.

Now as a consequence of this system, every being containing in itself a portion of the igneous and ethereal fluid, common and universal mover; and this fluid, soul of the world, being the Divinity, it followed that the souls of all beings were a portion of God himself, partaking of all his attributes, that is, being a substance indivisible, simple and immortal; and hence the whole system of the immortality of the soul which at first was eternity. Hence also its transmigration, known by the name of metempsychosis, that is the passage of the vital principle from one body to another; an idea which arose from the real transmigration of the material elements. And behold, ye Indians, Boudhists, Christians, and Musselmans! whence are derived all your opinions on the spirituality of the soul; behold what was the source of the dreams of Pythagoras and Plato, your masters, who were themselves but the echoes of another, the last sect of visionary philosophers, which we will proceed to examine.

A footnote on the same page adds more to what has just been quoted:

In the system of the spiritualists, the soul was not created with or at the same time as the body in order to be inserted in it: it existed anteriorly and from all eternity. Such, in a few words, is the doctrine of Macrobius on this head. [S]om. Scip. passim.
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There exists a luminous, igneous, subtle fluid, which under the name of ether and spiritus, fills the universe; it is the essential principle and agent of motion and life. . . . When the body dies, and its gross elements dissolve, this incorruptible particle quits it, and returns to the grand ocean of ether, if not retained by its union with the lunar air; it is this air (or gas) which, retaining the shape of the body, becomes a phantom or a shade, the perfect image of the deceased. . . .

If a man had not lived virtuously, the soul remained on earth to be purified, and wandered to and fro. . . . Herodotus upon this occasion says, that the whole romance of the soul and its transmigrations was invented by the Egyptians. . . .

Still earlier in Volney's work there is another passage which Shelley must have seen. It expresses essentially the same idea as the one just quoted except that it suggests the possibility of the soul of a man inhabiting the body of a lower animal:

. . . Having made the earth and the bodies of animals, this God, essence of motion, imparted to them a portion of his own being to animate them; for this reason the soul of everything that breathes, being a fraction of the universal soul, no one of them can perish, they only change their form and mould in passing successively into different bodies: of all these forms, the one most pleasing to God is that of man, as most resembling his own perfections. . . .

We may also notice that, in a footnote on the following page, Boudd is spoken of as the “9th avatar or incarnation of Vichenou. . . .”

We know that a few years before he wrote this poem Shelley was impressed by reading two long narratives of Southey, *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehama*. He could also have obtained the idea of metempsychosis from them, for there are several passages in each which treat the theme. In *Thalaba* (Book XI, stanza 16 ff), for example, there is a team of dogs which harbor the penitent souls of departed wrongdoers, and which are waiting for Thalaba to
complete his mysterious mission and free them. Smacking strongly of Shelley's line

Think ye, because ye weep, and kneel, and pray
(X, xxxvii)

are the two describing these dogs, who

... ever, at the hour of prayer,
... stopp'd and knelt, and wept.
(Thalaba the Destroyer XI, 21.)

In the same poem (XI, 4 ff) a young girl Laila is killed, and her soul reappears in the form of a green bird in order to help her lover Thalaba.

Other examples in Thalaba and The Curse of Kehama could be pointed out, but they would serve only to show what these two have shown: that Shelley, if he were gripped by the poems at all, certainly remembered these incidents; and he, who made use of so much material gleaned from his reading, could have easily found a use for this motif.

Let us turn, however, to more definite evidence. In the introductory canto, Shelley has used two figures to represent the Spirit of Good: the Morning Star and the Serpent; and two to represent the Spirit of Evil: the blood-red Comet and the Eagle. The Woman tells the poet that in watching the fight between the Eagle and the Serpent he has witnessed the eternal struggle between Good and Evil. Thus, she identifies the Serpent which she now holds in her embrace with the Spirit of Good. The problem facing us now is to make an identification of the Serpent with Laon. One aspect of this can be solved, I think, by showing that Laon, in the succeeding cantos, is more than a man engaged in a struggle for truth, justice, and liberty against great odds. He is actually a symbol of these things. In other words, he represents the Spirit of Good as do the Morning Star and the Serpent. This fact can be seen in a close examination of several
Metempsychosis in *The Revolt of Islam* passages in which Laon, merely by an act of intervention, quells uprisings or curbs cruelty; or of several others in which only the mention of his name is sufficient to produce acts of benevolence and goodness from those who are the tools of tyrants. We also notice, however, that, like the Serpent in Canto I, Laon is not victorious in the end; evil seems to prevail as it does in the introduction.

The first of such passages occurs in Canto IV. Laon has been made captive and forced to stay long atop the high peak to which his captors carried him. At last he is rescued by the old Hermit, who nurses him through a long illness. Concerning this old man Laon says:

... to the land on which the victor’s flame
    Had fed, my native land, the Hermit came:
Each heart was there a shield, and every tongue
    Was as a sword, of truth—young Laon’s name
Rallied their secret hopes, though tyrants sung
Hymns of triumphant joy our scattered tribes among.

(IV, x.)

The old man speaks to Laon, telling him of all the good which the former’s study and writings in the cause of truth and liberty have done. Young men gather, while tyrants sleep, to bind themselves together with “vows of faith.” Parents read his writings to their children, tyrants tremble at voices they hear in the streets, “murderers are pale upon the judgment seats,” and “kind thoughts, and mighty hopes, and gentle deeds abound.” And the old man, speaking to Laon, explains how he has been able to accomplish this:

“For I have been thy passive instrument”—
    (As thus the old man spake, his countenance
Gleamed on me like a spirit’s)—“thou hast lent
    To me, to all, the power to advance
Towards this unforeseen deliverance
From our ancestral chains—ay, thou didst rear
    That lamp of hope on high, which time nor chance
Nor change may not extinguish, and my share
Of good, was o’er the world its gathered beams to bear.”

(IV, xvi.)
And he continues his praise of Laon, whose name has such a powerful effect upon the people:

... Laon's name to the tumultous throng  
    Were like the star whose beams the waves compel  
    And tempests, and his soul-subduing tongue  
    Were as a lance to quell the mailed crest of wrong.  

(IV, xvii.)

After the Hermit has told him of the wondrous work the unknown maiden is doing at the Golden City, Laon sets out to the city hoping he will find that this girl is his lost Cythna. He spends the night in conversation with an old friend, and while they talk, a conflict arises. The slaves of the tyrant have come upon them in the night and are raging through the camp, spreading death and despair in their wake. This destruction continues until

... 'Laon!' one did cry:  
    Like a bright ghost from Heaven that shout did scare  
    The slaves, and widening through the vaulted sky,  
    Seemed sent from Earth to heaven in sign of victory.  
    In sudden panic those false murders fled,  
    Like insect tribes before the northern gale.  

(V, vii-viii.)

The people pursue, surround the fugitives, and would kill them. Laon intervenes, receives a spear wound in his arm, and harangues the crowd until he wins both parties to his side. They go, shouting, to the city:

And they, and all, in one loud symphony  
    [Laon's] name with Liberty commingling, lifted,  
    'The friend and the preserver of the free!'  

(V, xviii.)

There is yet another time when Laon intervenes on behalf of the opposition. As he leads the defeated tyrant out of his castle, the throng surrounds the two, crying for the tyrant's blood. Laon pleads successfully for the tyrant, saying that "justice is the light of love."
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In Canto VI the tyrant Othman has appealed to another of his kind for aid. The cavalry of this new menace sweeps through the camp. Seeing the overwhelming masses, Laon rushes against them. They are at first stemmed, but soon turn and overcome him. Thus, Evil again is triumphant, as the Woman in Canto I has pointed out, after the forces of Good have had their day.

It is not until the eleventh canto that we have another reference to the power which Laon and his name hold over men. In this canto he arrives, in disguise, at the Golden City and addresses the senate and the king, who know him only as a “Stranger.” He speaks to the “princes of earth” who have demanded Laon and Cythna’s death. He mentions the name of Laon and immediately “tumult and affray” arise and

The men of faith and law then without ruth
Drew forth their secret steel, and stabbed each ardent youth.

(XI, xix.)

One of them attempts to stab the Stranger:

‘What hast thou to do
With me, poor wretch?’—Calm, solemn, and severe,
[Laon’s] voice unstrung his sinews, and he threw
His dagger on the ground, and pale with fear,
Sate silently. . . .

(XI, xx.)

Laon then discloses his identity and surrenders himself, asking only that he be allowed to send Cythna to America. The tyrants grant this boon in order to be sure of his execution. In Canto XII, however, Cythna again joins him and insists on being executed with him. Thus, again Evil is temporarily victorious, as is expressed by the child who comes to bear them to the realm of the Spirit after death:

‘When the consuming flames had wrapped ye round,
The hope which I had cherished went away.’

(XII, xxv.)
And yet not all hope is abandoned, for one arises and speaks before the multitude:

'These perish as the good and great of yore
Have perished, and their murderers will repent...

(XII, xxviii.)

Thus, Laon symbolizes something more than a man. He appears to be the embodiment, the supreme example, of the Spirit of Good of which the Woman speaks in Canto I. By evincing this fact, we identify Laon with the Serpent, which, as the Woman says, also represents the Spirit of Good.

Such an identification may clarify another otherwise enigmatic exclamation in Canto I. When the poet asks the Woman if she fears the Serpent on her heart, she replies, "'Fear it!' with brief and passionate cry" (I, xlvii). We may read passionate tenderness into the lines and hear her speak the words as if she were saying "love it," or better still "love him" if the Serpent is actually Laon transformed.

It is also possible to point out certain parallels between the life of the Woman of Canto I, as she tells it to the poet, and the events in the life of Cythna, particularly those having to do with her activity at the Golden City after the horrible treatment of her at the hands of Othman. Thus, the "free and happy orphan child" of Canto I could be the orphan Cythna of Canto II; and her being "nurtured in divinest lore" of a dying poet, "a youth with hoary hair," could refer to Cythna's relations with Laon in Canto II, when he taught her

Hymns which [her] soul had woven to Freedom, strong
The source of passion, whence they rose, to be;
Triumphant strains, which, like a spirit's tongue,
To the enchanted waves that child of glory sung...

(II, xxviii.)

Note that Laon, after his imprisonment and illness in Cantos V and VI, is prematurely grey (IV, xxix).
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Not only was the Woman nurtured in this “divinest lore,” but

... this lore did sway
[Her] spirit like a storm, contending there alway.
(I, xxxvii.)

In canto II Laon, while still speaking of the hymns which he taught Cythna, says,

And this beloved child thus felt the sway
Of my conceptions, gathering like a cloud
The very wind on which it rolls away. . . .
(II, xxxi.)

Then, according to her story, the Woman was overjoyed at the rise of the French Revolution. “Sweet madness” and a deep slumber fell on her and she loved—not a human lover,

For when I rose from sleep, the Morning Star
Shone through the woodbine-wreaths which round my casement were.
(I, xl.)

Evidently, we are to identify this “Morning Star” with the one which contested with the “Red Comet” of which she spoke earlier. If so, we see that actually she loved the Spirit of Good in the world. If, as I have attempted to show, Laon represents this Spirit throughout the poem, it is actually he whom she loved.

This fact is strengthened by later occurrences in the Woman’s story. In her dreams a “winged youth” appears who wears the Morning Star on his brow. He asks her how she can prove her worth. She is led on by that Spirit’s tongue, which seems to whisper in her heart. Then,

‘How, to that vast and peopled city led,
Which was a field of holy warfare then,
I walked among the dying and the dead,
And shared in fearless deeds with evil men,
Calm as an angel in the dragon’s den—
How I braved death for liberty and truth,
And spurned at peace, and power, and fame—and when
Those hopes had lost the glory of their youth,
How sadly I returned—might move the hearer's ruth. . .
(I. xliv.)

This may be the same Cythna (or Laone as she now calls herself) of whom the old Hermit speaks in Canto IV. We lose sight of Cythna in Canto III when she is borne away to slavery in the ships of the tyrant. Laon has gone through the ordeals of captivity, famine, and madness, and has been rescued by the old man. He tells Laon of the woman who goes about preaching liberation and truth. She has encamped with thousands of her followers outside the Golden City. The stanza in which he tells of Cythna's daring is reminiscent of the one just quoted:

... 'for lately did a maiden fair,
Who from her childhood has been taught to bear
The tyrant’s heaviest yoke, arise, and make
Her sex the law of truth and freedom hear,
And with these quiet words—"for thine own sake
I prithee spare me;"—did with ruth so take

'All hearts, that even the torturer who had bound
Her meek calm frame, ere it was yet impaled,
Loosened her, weeping then; nor could be found
One human hand to harm her—unassailed
Therefore she walks through the great City, veiled
In virtue's adamantine eloquence,
'Cainst scorn, and death and pain thus trebly mailed,
And blending, in the smiles of that defence,
The Serpent and the Dove, Wisdom and Innocence.'

(IV, xviii-xix.)

Both the Woman of Canto I and Cythna walk through the city unafraid, and both brave death for liberty and truth.

Here, however, the Woman's story breaks off, for "warm tears throng fast! the tale may not be said." It is clearly too horrible to tell to the stranger. Yet Cythna in Canto VII, after their attempt at freeing the Golden City has been thwarted, tells Laon of the mistreatment of her at the hands of the tyrant Othman, of his abandoning her after he had
wreaked his passion upon her, and of the birth of her child. Much too horrible to remember now (as the Woman talks to the poet in Canto I) and certainly to relate again is the vivid description of the torture she endured.

But, the Woman continues, not all was misery then, for

'Know then, that when this grief had been subdued,
I was not left, like others, cold and dead;
The Spirit whom I loved, in solitude
Sustained this child. . . .'  

(I, xlv.)

She seems to be reminiscing on the happiness which Laon and Cythna experienced while living together in the cave, after their liberation plans had failed and they were driven from the city by the tyrant. It is then that Laon, going forth each night in search of food, sustains Cythna.

This wonderful joy did not last, however, for, continues the Woman,

... 'know thou alone
That after many wondrous years were flown,
I was awakened by a shriek of woe;
And over me a mystic robe was thrown,
By viewless hands, and a bright Star did glow
Before my steps— the Snake then met his mortal foe.'  

(I, xlvi.)

Laon and Cythna meet their death in Canto XII, bringing to an end their period of happiness. The "mystic robe" is cast about them, and the "Snake [Spirit of Good, Laon] meets his mortal foe."

One other point which may be considered in the identification of the Woman of Canto I with Cythna is the strange and beautiful voice which each possesses. It will be remembered that when the Serpent is defeated by the Eagle and drops into the sea, the poet descends to the shore and hears the Woman speak:
She spake in language whose strange melody
   Might not belong to earth. I heard, alone,
What made its music more melodious be,
The pity and love of every tone. . . .

(I, xix.)

Note that the language is "not of this earth" and yet is understood by the Serpent, which responds to it.

There are at least four passages in succeeding cantos in which the beauty of Cythna's voice is extolled. In Canto II she sings the hymns taught her by Laon:

... suddenly

She would arise, and, like the secret bird
   Whom sunset wakens, fill the shore and sky
With her sweet accents—a wild melody.

(II, xxviii.)

Again, in Canto V, when Laon approaches the Golden City after his trying ordeals and rescue by the Hermit, he is about to behold Laone, whom he believes to be Cythna. She speaks:

Like music of some minstrel heavenly-gifted,
   To one whom fiends enthrall, this voice to me;
Scarce did I wish her veil to be uplifted,
   I was so calm and joyous.

(V, xlvi.)

Then, in Canto VI, as the attempt to liberate the Golden City fails, Laon is pressed hard by his enemies and is rescued by Cythna on the black charger. Her voice, as she speaks to him, is compared to the sound of "waters in the desert" (VI, xx). Lastly, sweet singing in Canto VII seems momentarily to quiet the evil thoughts raging in the mind of the tyrant.

The tyrant heard her singing to her lute
   A wild, and sad, and spirit-thrilling lay,
Like winds that die in wastes—one moment mute
The evil thoughts it made, which did his breast pollute.

(VII, iv.)

This survey brings us to a consideration of the ending of
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the poem. Why did Shelley wish to portray the journey of Laon and Cythna to the realm of the Spirit, i.e., paradise? Shelley could have let his story end with the death of the two lovers. If he were not content to do so, it was not because of his desire to give us an imaginative picture of the "realm of pure Spirit," for he had already shown us that realm in the first canto. The artist does not *paint* a picture twice merely for the sake of *exhibiting* it twice. It seems, rather, that Shelley is completing a kind of framework for his poem. He wanted to show that the poet was conducted to the same realm, to that paradise to which Laon and Cythna were wafted after their death. In order to do this, it was necessary to describe their journey and arrival there much in the same manner as he had described the journey and arrival of the Woman and the poet in Canto I. Although not conclusive evidence, this explanation, it would seem, strengthens the idea that Cythna and the poet's guide in Canto I are one and the same person.

Lastly, it will bear mentioning that, if Laon and Cythna are interested in telling their tale to a mortal, it is logical that they are the two who would be most likely to conduct him to their "realm of pure Spirit."

If the evidence of Shelley's use of metempsychosis which has been presented in this discussion be acceptable, it is important for at least two reasons. In the first place, it gives the poem the unity which the reader feels should exist, and yet which has long been lamented as lacking. Shelley has put his poem in a sort of framework; it is actually a tale within a tale. The relationship which Canto I bears to the other eleven cantos is that the Woman "beautiful as morning," and the Serpent who represents the Spirit of Good in Canto I are the reincarnated spirits of Cythna and Laon. The poem is unified, therefore, by the fact that its plot cen-
ters not around two distinct sets of characters, but around one set.

Moreover, the theory presented here, in addition to giving unity to the poem, also enhances its narrative quality. Shelley, therefore, is credited with some care for and knowledge of the storyteller's art, for his use of the metempsychosis motif establishes *The Revolt of Islam* as a framework poem, a literary genre which is firmly fixed in tradition.

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**NOTES**

5a. On this point see Bennett Weaver, "Pre-Promethean Thought in Three Longer Poems of Shelley," *Philological Quarterly*, XXIX (1950), p. 359. Professor Weaver's article appeared after this manuscript had gone to press.
8. Ibid., p. 158.
9. Ibid., pp. 144-145.
10. Ibid., p. 107.