best lyrics and verse letters. The end came suddenly, and in a way prefigured uncannily in the last stanza of Adonais, in which he had described his spirit as a ship driven by a violent storm out into the dark unknown. On July 8, 1822, Shelley and Edward Williams were sailing their open boat, the Don Juan, on the Gulf of Spezia. A violent squall smashed the boat. When several days later the bodies were washed ashore, they were cremated, and Shelley's ashes were buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, near the graves of John Keats and William Shelley, the poet's young son.

Shelley's character has been the subject of heated and contradictory estimates, and commentators have also disagreed, analogously, in their assessments of his success at mixing politics and poetry. The actions that he justified to himself because they were true to his convictions often led to disastrous consequences for those near him, especially women; and even recent scholars, while repudiating the vicious attacks made by Shelley's contemporaries, attribute some of those actions to a self-assured egoism that masked itself as idealism. Yet Byron, who knew Shelley intimately, and did not readily pay compliments, wrote to his publisher John Murray, in response to attacks on Shelley at the time of his death: "You are all brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the best and least selfish man I ever knew." Vilified by the Tory press during his lifetime, Shelley's politics recommended his poetry to many later political radicals: the Chartists in the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels at the end, and at the start of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi and many guiding lights of the British Labour Party. And, despite their ideological differences, Wordsworth recognized early on the extent to which Shelley in that poetry had expanded English versification's metreical and stanzaic resources: "Shelley," Wordsworth said, "is one of the best artists of us all."

The texts here are those prepared by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat for Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (2001); Reiman has also edited for this anthology a few poems not included in that edition.

To Wordsworth

Poet of Nature, thou hast wert to know
That things depart which never may return;
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.

These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
Thou wast a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty.

Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

ca. 1814–15

1816

Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude  Shelley wrote Alastor in the fall and early winter of 1815 and published it in March 1816. According to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, the poet was "at a loss for a title, and I proposed that which he adopted: Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude. The Greek word Alastor is an evil genius... I mention the true meaning of the word because many have supposed Alastor to be the name of the hero" (Memoirs of Shelley). Peacock's definition of an alastor as "an evil genius" has compounded the problems in interpreting this work: the term evil does not seem to fit the attitude expressed within the poem toward the protagonist's solitary quest, the poem seems to clash with statements in Shelley's preface, and the first and second paragraphs of the preface seem inconsistent with each other. These problems, however, may be largely resolved if we recognize that, in this early achievement (he was only twenty-three when he wrote Alastor), Shelley established his characteristic procedure of working with multiple perspectives. Both preface and poem explore alternative and conflicting possibilities in what Shelley calls "doubtful knowledge"—matters that are humanly essential but in which no certainty is humanly possible.

By the term allegorical in the opening sentence of his preface, Shelley seems to mean that his poem, like medieval and Renaissance allegories such as Dante's Divine Comedy and Spenser's Faerie Queene, represents an aspiration in the spiritual realm by the allegorical vehicle of a journey and quest in the material world. As Shelley's first paragraph outlines, the poem's protagonist, for whom objects in the natural world "cease to suffice," commits himself to the search for a female Other who will fulfill his intellectual, imaginative, and sensuous needs. The second paragraph of the preface, by contrast, passes judgment on the visionary protagonist in terms of the values of "actual men"—that is, the requirements of human and social life in this world. From this point of view, the visionary has been "avenged" (punished) for turning away from community in pursuit of his individual psychic needs. The diversity of attitudes expressed within the poem becomes easier to understand.

1. Shelley's grieved comment on the poet of nature and of social radicalism after his views had become conservative.
2. Perhaps an allusion to "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty," the title that Wordsworth gave to the section of sonnets such as "London, 1802" when he republished them in his Poems of 1807.
Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude

Preface

The poem entitled "Alastor," may be considered as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind. It represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate. The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted. So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image. He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.

The picture is not barren of instruction to actual men. The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin. But that Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences, dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meeker spirits that dare to abjure its dominion. Their destiny is more abject and inglorious as their delinquency is more contemptible and pernicious. They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country. Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave.

"The good die first,
And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust,
Burn to the socket."²

December 14, 1815

Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude

Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quæ velam quid amarem.—Confess. St. August.³

Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!
If our great Mother² has imbued my soul
With ought of natural piety⁴ to feel
Your love, and recompense the boon⁵ with mine,⁶
If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,"⁶
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,
And solemn midnight's tingling silentness;
If autumn's hollow sighs in the sere wood,
And winter robing with pure snow and crowns
Of starry ice the grey grass and bare boughs;
If spring's voluptuous pantings when she breathes
Her first sweet kisses, have been dear to me;
If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast
I consciously have injured, but still loved
And cherished these my kindred; then forgive
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw
No portion of your wonted⁷ favour now!

Mother of this unfathomable world!
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched

² Wordsworth's The Excursion 1519-21; the passage occurs also in The Ruined Cottage 96-98, which Wordsworth reworked into the first book of The Excursion (1814).
³ St. Augustine's Confessions 3.1: "Not yet did I love, though I loved to love, seeking what I might love, loving to love." Augustine thus describes his state of mind when he was addicted to illicit sexual love: the true object of his desire, which compelled the turbid spirit of his journey of life, he later discovered to be the infinite and transcendent God.
⁴ Nature, invoked as common mother to both the elements and the poet.
⁵ And Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up," lines 8-9: "And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by nature's piety." Wordsworth also used these lines as the epigraph to his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."
By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,
His infancy was nurtured. Every light
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.

The fountains of divine philosophy
Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great
Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past
In truth or fable consecrates, he felt

And knew. When early youth had past, he left
His cold fireside and alienated home
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.
Many a wide waste and tangled wilderness
Has lured his fearless steps; and he has bought
With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men,
His rest and food. Nature's most secret steps
He like her shadow has pursued, where'er
The red volcano overcanopies
Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice
With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes
On black bare pointed islets ever beat
With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves
Rugged and dark, winding among the springs
Of fire and poison, inaccessible
To avarice or pride, their starry domes
Of diamond and of gold expand above
Numberless and immeasurable halls,
Frequent with crystal column, and clear shrines
Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.

Nor had that scene of ampler majesty
Than gems or gold, the varying roof of heaven
And the green earth lost in his heart its claims
To love and wonder; he would linger long
In lonesome vales, making the wild his home;
Until the doves and squirrels would partake
From his innocent hand his bloodless food,
Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks,
And the wild antelope, that starts whene'er
The dry leaf rustles in the brake, suspend
Her timid steps to gaze upon a form
More graceful than her own.

His wandering step
Obedient to high thoughts, has visited
The awful ruins of the days of old:

Awe-inspiring
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste
Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers
Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,
Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoever of strange
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,

8. Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality,
   lines 141-42. "Thou dost disdain these abstruse questionings
   / Of sense and outward things."

9. The narrator calls on the Mother, his natural muse,
   to make her as his harp.


A presence... / Whose dwelling is... the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, / and in the mind of man / A motion and a spirit.

2. The cypress represented mourning. "Votive" offered to fulfill a vow to the gods.

3. Lakes of pitch, flowing from a volcano.

4. An olive-green semiprecious stone.

5. Shelley was himself a vegetarian.

6. An ancient city in what is now Lebanon. Tyre was once an important commercial city on the Phoenician coast.

7. The ancient capital of Upper Egypt. Memphis is the ruined capital of Lower Egypt.
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,
Dark. & Ethiopia in her desert hills
Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,
Stupendous columns, and wild images
Of more than man, where marble daemons watch
The Zodiac's brazen mystery, and dead men
Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,
He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day
Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,
Her daily portion, from her father's tent,
And spread her matting for his couch, and stole
From duties and repose to tend his steps—
Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe
To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,
Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips
Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath
Of innocent dreams arose: then, when red morn
Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home
Wilder'd, and wan, and pining, she returned.

The Poet wandering on, through Arabia
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste;
And o'er the aërial mountains which pour down
Indus and Oxus from their icy caves,
In joy and exultation held his way;
Till in the vale of Cashmere, far within
Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine
Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,
Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched
His languid limbs. A vision on his sleep
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
Heard in the calm of thought; its music long.
Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held

8. In Greek mythology, not evil spirits but minor deities or attendant spirits.
9. In the temple of Isis at Denderah, Egypt, the Zodiac is represented on the ceiling. Journeying among the great civilizations of the past has taken the Poet back to a time to older and older cultures—from the Greeks to the Phoenicians, the Jews, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Finally he reached Ethiopia (line 118), which was described as the “cradle of the sciences.”
10. I.e., by quotations inscribed in the stone.
11. A desert in southern Persia.
12. Rivers in Asia.
13. Now known as Kashmir, an Indian state bordering on the northeast by the Himalayas. In this choice of setting, Shelley was influenced by The Missionary, the 1811 novel by Sydney Owenson. See “The Romantic Imagination and the ‘Oriental Nations’” on p. 92.

His inmost sense suspended in its web
Of many-coloured wool and shifting hues.
Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
Herself a poet. Soon the solemn mood
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame
A permeating fire; wild numbers then
She raised, with voice stifled in tumultuous sobs
Subdued by its own pathos; her fair hands
Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.
The beating of her heart was heard to fill
The pauses of her music, and her breath
Tumultuously accorded with those fits
Of intermitted song. Sudden she rose,
As if her heart impatiently endured
Its bursting burden: at the sound he turned,
And saw by the warm light of their own life
Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly
His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess
Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled
His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
Her panting bosom:... she drew back a while,
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.
Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night
Involved and swallowed up the vision; sleep,
Like a dark flood suspended in its course,
Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain.
Thus treacherously? Lost, lost, for ever lost,
In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep,
That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,
O Sleep?* Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,
And pendent* mountains seen in the calm lake,
Lead only to a black and watery depth,
While death's blue vault, with loathliest vapours hung,
Where every shade which the foul grave exhales
Hides its dead eye from the detested day,
Conduct, O Sleep, to thy delightful realms?
This doubt with sudden tide flowed on his heart,
The insatiate hope which it awakened, stung
His brain even like despair.

While day-light held
The sky, the Poet kept mute conference
With his still soul. At night the passion came,
Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,
And shook him from his rest, and led him forth
Into the darkness.—As an eagle grasped
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast
Burn with the poison, and precipitates:*
Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight
O'er the wide airy wilderness; thus driven
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,
Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,
Startling with careless step the moon-light snake;
He fled. Red morning dawned upon his flight,
Shedding the mockery of its vital hues
Upon his cheek of death. He wandered on,
Till vast Aornos seen from Petra's steep
Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;
Through Balk,* and where the desolated toms
Of Parthian kings scatter to every wind
Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,
Day after day, a weary waste of hours,
Bearing within his life the brooding care
That ever fed on its decaying flame.
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering.

Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand
Hung like dead bone within its withered skin,
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone
As in a furnace burning secretly
From his dark eyes alone. The cottagers,

Who ministered with human charity
His human wants, beheld with wondering awe
Their fleeting visitant. The mountaineer,
Encountering on some dizzy precipice
That spectral form, deemed that the Spirit of wind
With lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet
Disturbing not the drifted snow, had paused
In its career: the infant would conceal
His troubled visage in his mother's robe
In terror at the glare of those wild eyes;
To remember their strange light in many a dream
Of after-times: but youthful maidens, taught
By nature, would interpret half the woe
That wasted him, would call him with false* names
Brother, and friend, would press his pallid hand
At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path
Of his departure from their father's door.

At length upon the lone Chorasmian shore
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste
Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged
His steps to the sea-shore. A swan was there,
Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.
It rose as he approached, and with strong wings
Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
High over the immeasurable main.

His eyes pursued its flight.—"Thou hast a home,
Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.
And what am I that I should linger here,
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven
That echoes not my thoughts?" A gloomy smile
Of desperate hope convulsed his curling lips
For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly
Its precious charge,* and silent death exposed,
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,
With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around,
There was no fair fiend* near him, not a sight
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.
A little shallow* floating near the shore
Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.
It had been long abandoned, for its sides

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5. I.e., is death the only access to this maiden of his dream?
6. The eagle and serpent locked in mortal combat are a recurrent image in Shelley's poems (see Prometheus Unbound 3.1.72-73).
7. A mountain stronghold in the northern part of ancient Arabia; Aornos is a high mountain.
8. Bactria, in ancient Persia, is now part of Afghanistan.

1. The shore of Lake Aral, about 175 miles east of the Caspian Sea.
2. I.e., the maiden in the sleeper's dream.
3. Apparently he suspects there may have been an external agent luring him to the death described in the preceding lines.
Now pausing on the edge of the riven wave;  
Now leaving far behind the bursting mass
That fell, convulsing ocean. Safely fled—
As if that frail and wasted human form,
Had been an elemental god.²

At midnight
The moon arose: and lo! the ethereal cliffs⁶
Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone
Among the stars like sunlight, and around
Whose cavern’d base the whirlpools and the waves
Bursting and eddying irresistibly
Rage and resound for ever.—Who shall save?
The boat fled on,—the boiling torrent drove,—
The crags closed round with black and jagged arms;
The shattered mountain overhung the sea,
And faster still, beyond all human speed, 
Suspended on the sweep of the smooth wave,
The little boat was driven. A cavern there
Yawned, and amid its slant and winding depths
Ingulphed the rushing sea. The boat fled on
With unrelaxing speed.—“Vision and Lovè”
The Poet cried aloud, “I have beheld
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death
Shall not divide us long!”

The winding of the cavern. Day-light shone
At length upon that gloomy river’s flow;
Now, where the fiercest war among the waves
Is calm, on the unfathomable stream
The boat moved slowly. Where the mountain, riven,
Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,
Ere yet the flood’s enormous volume fell
Even to the base of Caucasus, with sound
That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass
FILLED with one whirlpool all that ample chasm;
Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,
Circling immeasurably fast, and laved
With alternating dash the knarled roots
Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms
In darkness over it. I the midst was left,
Reflecting, yet distorting every cloud,
A pool of treacherous and tremendous calm:
Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,
Till on the verge of the extremest curve,
Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,
The waters overflow, and a smooth spot
Of glassy quiet mid those battling tides

4. If the Poet’s boat is being carried upstream on the Oues River from the Aral Sea to the river’s headwaters in the Hindu Kush Mountains (the ‘Indian Caucasus’ that is the setting for Prometheus Unbound), then the journey is taking him to a region that the naturalist Buffon (whom
Shelley often read) had identified as the cradle of the human race. But it is also possible that the
starting point of this journey is the Caspian Sea, in which case the journey would end near the
traditional site of the Garden of Eden.

5. A god of one of the natural elements (see line 1).

6. i.e., cliffs high in the air.
Is left, the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
Of that resistless gulp embosom it?
Now shall it fall?—A wandering stream of wind,
Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,
And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks
Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,
Beneath a woven grove it sails, and, hark!
The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar,
With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods.
Where the emboving trees recede, and leave
A little space of green expanse, the cove.
Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,
Reflected in the crystal calm. The wave
Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,
Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,
Or failing spear-grass, or their own decay
Had e'er disturbed before. The Poet longed
To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,
But on his heart its solitude returned,
And he forsook. Not the strong impulse hid
In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame,
Had yet performed its ministry: it hung
Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud
Gleams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods
Of night close over it.

The noonday sun
Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass
Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence
A narrow vale embosoms. There, huge coves,
Scooped in the dark base of their aery rocks,
Mocking its moans, respond and roar for ever.
The meeting boughs and implicated leaves
Wove twilight o'er the Poet's path, as led
By love, or dream, or god, or mightier Death,
He sought in Nature's dearest haunt, some bank,
Her cradle, and his sepulchre. More dark
And dark the shades accumulate. The oak,
Expanding its immense and knotty arms,
Embraces the light beech. The pyramids
Of the tall cedar overarching, frame
Most solemn domes within, and far below.
Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,
The ash and the acacia floating hang
Tremulous and pale. Like restless serpents, clothed
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,
Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around
The grey trunks, and, as game some infants' eyes,
With gentle meanings, and most innocent wiles.
Fold their beams round the hearts of those that love,
These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs
Uniting their close union; the woven leaves
Make net-work of the dark blue light of day,
And the night's noontide clearness, mutable
As shapes in the weird clouds. Soft mossy lawns
Beneath these canopies extend their swells,
Fragrant with perfumed herbs, and eyed with blooms
Minute yet beautiful. One darkest glen
Sends from its woods of musc-rose, twined with jasmine,
A soul-dissolving odour, to invite
To some more lovely mystery. Through the dell,
Silence and Twilight here, twin-sisters, keep
Their noonday watch, and sail among the shades.
Like vaporous shapes half seen; beyond, a well
Dark, gleaming, and of most translucent wave
Images all the woven boughs above,
And each depending leaf, and every speck
Of azure sky, darting between their chasms;
Nor aught else in the liquid mirror laves
Its portraiture, but some inconstant star
Between one foliated lattice twinkling fair,
Or, painted bird, sleeping beneath the moon,
Or gorgeous insect floating motionless.
Unconscious of the day, ere yet his wings
Have spread their glories to the gaze of noon.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld
Their own wan light through the reflected lines
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. He heard
The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed
To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery.
But, undulating woods, and silent well,
And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom
Now deepening the dark shades, for speech assuming
Held commune with him, as if he and it
Were all that was,—only. . . when his regard
Was raised by intense pensiveness, . . . two eyes,
Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles
To beckon him.
Obedient to the light
That shone within his soul, he went, pursuing
The windings of the dell,—the rivulet
Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine
Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell
Among the moss with hollow harmony
Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones
It danced; like childhood laughing as it went:
Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,
Reflecting every herb and drooping bud
That overhung its quietness,—"O stream!
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
Thy dazzling waves; thy loud and hollow gulps,
Thy searchless source; a monument, and invisible course,
Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,
And measureless ocean may declare as soon
What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud
Contains thy waters, as the universe
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste
I the passing wind."

Beside the grassy shore
Of the small stream he went; he did impress
On the green moss his tremulous step, that caught
Strong shuddering from his burning limbs. As one
Roused by some joyous madness from the couch
Of fever, he did move; yet, not like him,
Forgetful of the grave, where, when the flame
Of his frail exultation shall be spent,
He must descend. With rapid steps he went
Beneath the shade of trees, beside the flow
Of the wild babbling rivulet; and now
The forest's solemn canopies were changed
For the uniform and lightsome evening sky.
Grey rocks did peep from the spare moss, and stemmed
The struggling brook: tall spires of windlestrae
Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope,
And nought but knarled roots of antient pines
Branchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots.
The unwilling soil. A gradual change was here,
Yet ghastly. For, as fast years flow away
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin
And white, and where irradiated dewy eyes
Had shone, gleam stony orbs—so from his steps
Bright flowers departed, and the beautiful shade
Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds
And musical motions. Calm, he still pursued
The stream, that with a larger volume now
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there
Fretted a path through its descending curves.
With its wintry speed. On every side now rose
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,
Lifted their black and barren pinnacles
In the light of evening, and its precipice
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,
Mid toppling stones, black gulps and yawning caves,
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues.
To the loud stream. Lol where the pass expands
Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,
And seems, with its accumulated crags,
To overhang the world: for wide expand
Beneath thewan stars and descending moon
Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,
Dim tracts and vast, rob'd in the lustrous gloom
Of leaden-coloured even, and fiery hills
Mingling their flames with twilight, on the verge
Of the remote horizon. The near scene,
In naked and severe simplicity,
Made contrast with the universe. A pine
Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy
Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast
Yielding one only response, at each pause.
In most familiar cadence, with the howl
The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams
Mingling its solemn song, whilst the broad river,
Foaming and hurrying o'er its rugged path,
Fell into that immeasurable void
Scattering its waters to the passing winds.

Yet the grey precipice and solemn pine
And torrent, were not all—one silent nook
Was there. Even on the edge of that vast mountain,
Upheld by knotty roots and fallen rocks,
It overlooked in its serenity
The dark earth, and the bending vault of stars.
It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile
Even in the lap of horror. Ivy clasped
The fissured stones with its entwining arms,
And did embower with leaves for ever green,
And berries dark, the smooth and even space
Of its inviolated floor, and here
The children of the autumnal whirlwind bore,
In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay
Red, yellow, or ethereally pale,
Rivals the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt
Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach
The wilds to love tranquillity. One step,
One human step alone, has ever broken
The stillness of its solitude:—one voice
Alone inspired its echoes,—even that voice.
Which hither came, floating among the winds,  
And led the loveliest among human forms  
To make their wild haunts the depository  
Of all the grace and beauty that endowed  
Its motions, render up its majesty,  
Scatter its music on the unfeeling storm,  
And to the damp leaves and blue cavern mould,  
Nurses of rainbow flowers and branching moss—  
Commit the colours of that varying cheek,  
That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

The dim and horned moon hung low, and poured  
A sea of lustre on the horizon’s verge  
That overflowed its mountains. Yellow mist  
Filled the unbounded atmosphere, and drank  
Wan moonlight even to fulness: not a star  
Shone, not a sound was heard; the very winds,  
Danger’s grim playmates, on that precipice  
Slept, clasped in his embrace.—O, storm of death!  
Whose sightless speed divides this sullen night  
And thou, colossal Skeleton, that, still  
Guiding its irremovable career  
In thy devastating omnipotence,  
Art king of this frail world, from the red field  
Of slaughter, from the reeking hospital,  
The patriot’s sacred couch, the snowy bed  
Of innocence, the scaffold and the throne,  
A mighty voice invokes thee. Ruin calls  
His brother Death. A rare and regal prey  
He hath prepared, prowling around the world;  
Glutted with which thou mayst repose, and men  
Go to their graves like flowers or creeping worms,  
Nor ever more offer at thy dark shrine  
The unheeded tribute of a broken heart.

When on the threshold of the green recess  
The wanderer’s footsteps fell, he knew that death  
Was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled,  
Did he resign his high and holy soul  
To images of the majestic past,  
That paused within his passive being now,  
Like winds that bear sweet music, when they breathe  
Through some dim latticed chamber. He did place  
His pale lean hand upon the rugged trunk  
Of the old pine. Upon an ivied stone  
Reclined his languid head, his limbs did rest;  
Diffused and motionless, on the smooth brink  
Of that obscurest chasm; and thus he lay,  
Surrendering to their final impulses  
The hovering powers of life. Hope and despair,  
The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear.
Shakes in its last decay, were the true law
Of this so lovely world; but thou art fled
Like some frail exhalation, which the dawn
Robes in its golden beams,—ah! thou hast fled!
The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,
690 The child of grace and genius. Heartless things
Are done and said—’tis the world, and many worms
And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth
From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,
In vespers low or joyous orison;
695 Lifts still its solemn voice,—but thou art fled—
Thou canst no longer know or love the shapes
Of this phantasmal scene, who have to thee
Been purest ministers, who are, alas!
Now thou art not. Upon those pallid lips
So sweet even in their silence, on those eyes
That image sleep in death, upon that form
Yet safe from the worm’s outrage, let no tear
Be shed—not even in thought. Nor, when those hues
Are gone, and those divinest lineaments,
700 Worn by the senseless wind, shall live alone.
In the frail pausings of this simple strain,
Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting’s woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,
And all the shews o’ the world are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
It is a woeful ‘deep for tears,’ when all
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clining hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
Nature’s vast tumult of human things,
720 Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

1815

Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
5 The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,
Such as a feebler book will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where waterfalls around it leap forever,
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

2
Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
7 awe-inspiring
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice gulsps that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie,
Thy giant brood of pine around thee clinging,
Children of elder time, in whose devotion
The chainless winds still come and ever came
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
To hear—an old and solemn harmony;
75 Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
Of the eternal waterfall, whose veil
Robes some uncultured image; the strange sleep
Which when the voices of the desert fail
Wreaps all in its own deep eternity;—
74 The caverns echoing to the Arve’s commotion,
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
Thou art the path of that unresting sound—
Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate phantasy,

1816

Mont Blanc!

Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—

Six Weeks’ Tour. This was a book that Percy and
and Mary Shelley wrote together detailing the excursi-
on that they took in 1816 to the valley of Chamounix, in what is now
and the highest mountain in the Alps
In the History Percy Shelley commented on his
poem: “It was composed under the immediate
impression of the deep and powerful feelings
excited by the objects it attempts to describe; and,
as an indiscriminate overflowings of the soul rests
its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate
the untamable wilderness and inaccessible solennity
from which those feelings sprang.” He was inspired
to write the poem while standing on a bridge span-
ning the river Arve, which flows through the valley
of Chamounix and is fed from above by the melof
of the glacier, the Mer de Glace.
In a letter that Thomas Love Peacock drafted in the
same week as “Mont Blanc,” Shelley had
recalled that the count de Buffon, a French pio-
nee of the science of geology, had
proposed a Sublime, that is, a principle that this
verse which Shelley takes from Buffon, of a Nature that
is utterly alien and indifferent to human beings
and whose history takes shape on a timescale of incomprehensible immensity is coun-
tered throughout “Mont Blanc” with Shelley’s inter-
est, fueled by his reading of 18th-century skeptic-
s such as David Hume, in questions about the
human mind, its powers, and the limits of knowl-
edge. “All things exist as they are perceived at
least in relation to the percipient,” Shelley would
later write in “A Defence of Poetry” (p. 881). In
“Mont Blanc,” the priority that this statement
gives to the mind over the external world is chal-
gen in the hands of the destructive power of the
mountain.

2. i.e., not formed by humans.