few words that I had time for speaking, I governed myself accordingly. I
showed her not the funeral banners under which the noble regiment was
sleeping. I lifted not the overshadowing laurels from the bloody trench in
which horse and rider lay mangled together. But I told her how these dear
children of England, privates and officers, had leaped their horses over all
obstacles as gaily as hunters to the morning's chase. I told her how they rode
their horses into the mists of death, (saying to myself, but not saying to her),
and laid down their young lives for thee, O mother England! as willingly-
poured out their noble blood as cheerfully—as ever, after a long day's sport,
when infants, they had rested their weary heads upon their mother's knees,
or had sunk to sleep in her arms. It is singular that she seemed to have no
fears, even after this knowledge that the 23rd Dragoons had been conspicuously
engaged, for her son's safety: but so much was she enraptured by the
knowledge that his regiment; and therefore he, had rendered eminent service in
the trying conflict—a service which had actually made them the foremost
topic of conversation in London—that in the mere simplicity of her fervent
nature, she threw her arms round my neck, and, poor woman, kissed me.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY
1792–1822

Percy Bysshe Shelley, radical in every aspect of his life and thought, emerged from
a solidly conservative background. His ancestors had been Sussex aristocrats since
early in the seventeenth century; his grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, made himself the
richest man in Horsham, Sussex; his father, Timothy Shelley, was a hardheaded
and conventional member of Parliament. Percy Shelley was in line for a baronetcy and,
as belittled his station, was sent to be educated at Eton and Oxford. As a youth he was
slight of build, eccentric in manner, and unskilled in sports or fighting and, as a
consequence, was mercilessly bullied by older and stronger boys. He later said that he saw
the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representative of man's general
inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression. As
he described the experience in the Dedication to Lycidas:

So without shame, I spake—"I will be wise,
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
Such power, for I grow weary to behold
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
Without reproach or check." Then I controuled
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

At Oxford in the autumn of 1810, Shelley's closest friend was Thomas Jefferson
Hogg, a self-centered, self-confident young man who shared Shelley's love of

2. The Battle of Talavera, July 27–28, 1809, an
important English victory in the Peninsular War,
was fought for control of the Iberian peninsula
following the Napoleonic conquest of Portugal

3. Field of blood, Acts I.19,
philosophy and scorn of orthodoxy. Shelley at this early date had already published, anonymously, two Gothic novels and three small volumes of verse, including his recently rediscovered Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things, an anti-war poem in heroic couplets. With Hogg he collaborated on a pamphlet, The Necessity of Atheism, which claimed that God's existence cannot be proved on empirical grounds, and, provocatively, the co-authors mailed it to the bishops and heads of the colleges at Oxford. Shelley refused to repudiate the document and, to his shock and grief, was peremptorily expelled, terminating a university career that had lasted only six months. This event opened a breach between Shelley and his father that widened over the years.

Shelley went to London, where he took up the cause of Harriet Westbrook, the pretty and warm-hearted daughter of a well-to-do tavern keeper, whose father, Shelley wrote to Hogg, "has persecuted her in a most horrible way by endeavoring to "gratitude and admiration," he wrote, "all that demand that I shall love her forever." He eloped with Harriet to Edinburgh and married her, against his conviction that marriage was a tyrannical and degrading social institution. He was then eighteen years old and a small allowance granted reluctantly by his family. In February 1812, accompanied by his sister Eliza, they traveled to Dublin to distribute Shelley's Address to the Irish People and otherwise take part in the movement for Catholic emancipation and for the amelioration of the oppressed and poverty-stricken people.

In London Shelley eagerly sought the acquaintance of the radical novelist and philosopher William Godwin, author of Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1794), and in 1813 he published his first important work, Queen Mab, A Philosophical Poem, which owes much to Godwin's optimistic conviction in Political Justice that the regeneration of the human species was at hand and that in these modern times "the phalanx of reason" would prove "inviolable" in its advance. In Shelley's long poem, which he printed at his own expense, so as to maneuver around blasphemy and sedition laws, the fairy Queen Mab reveals to a journeying soul her denunciations of institutional religion, aristocracy, and monarchy at length in the poem's many endnotes. These aesthetic and revolutionary sentiments made Shelley infamous for the rest of his life. They also, somewhat to his embarrassment in later life, came to the attention of the radical press, which kept Queen Mab in print, in cheap, pirated editions, for the rest of the century.

In the following spring Shelley, who had drifted away from Harriet, fell in love with Godwin's and the late Mary Wollstonecraft's beautiful and intelligent daughter Mary. Convinced that cohabitation without love was immoral, he abandoned Harriet, in accordance with his belief in nonexclusive love—invited Harriet to come live with him as another sister. Shelley's elopement with Mary outraged her father, even though his own views of marriage had once been, on the testimony of Political Justice, no less radical than Shelley's and even though Shelley, despite his own financial difficulties, had earlier taken over Godwin's substantial debts. When he returned to London, Shelley found that the public, his family, and many friends regarded him as not only an atheist and a revolutionist but also a libertine. When two years later Harriet, pregnant by an unknown lover, drowned herself in a fit of despair, the courts denied Shelley the custody of their two children. (His first child with Mary Godwin had died earlier, only twelve days after her birth in February 1815.) Percy and Mary married in December 1816, and in spring 1818 they moved to Italy. In Italy Shelley resumed his restless way of life, evading the tax collector to whom he owed money by moving from town to town and house to house. His health was usually bad. Although the death of his grandfather in 1815 had provided a substantial income, he dissipated so much of it by his warm-hearted but imprudent support of Godwin and other needy acquaintances that he was constantly short of funds.

Within nine months of their arrival in Italy, both Clara and William, the children Mary had borne in 1815 and 1817, died. Grief over these deaths destroyed the earlier harmony of the Shelleys' marriage; the birth in November 1819 of another son, Percy Florence, (their only child to survive to adulthood), was not enough to mend the rift.

In these circumstances Shelley wrote his greatest works. Exile from England prompted him, on the one hand, to envision himself as an alien and outcast, bereft of an audience, and rejected by the human race to whose welfare he had dedicated his powers. It also prompted him, on the other hand, to imagine and, to a lesser extent, initiate new kinds of intellectual alliances and forms of ethical and political community, ambitions manifested in his friendship with Lord Byron and in the invitations to join him in Italy that he extended to Keats, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Peacock, and others. The poems of 1819–21, so rich and complex in part because they often seek to reconcile these conflicting accounts of the poet's self in relation to community, include (from 1819 alone) Prometheus Unbound, an epic-scale "closet-drama" about the Greek Titan's survival and transcendence of oppression; his Jacobean-style revenge tragedy The Cenci; his visionary call for revolution, The Mask of Anarchy; a witty satire on Wordsworth, Peter Bell the Third, a penetrating, proto-Marxist essay, "A Philosophical View of Reform"; and numerous lyric poems. Later came "A Defence of Poetry"; Epipsychidion, a rhapsodic love of love as a spiritual union beyond earthly limits; Adonais, his elegy on Keats, representing the younger poet as a victim of a politicized review culture; and Hellas, a lyrical drama inspired by the Greek war for liberation from the Turks.

These writings are enriched by Shelley's omnivorous reading, in the natural sciences, ancient and modern philosophy, Dante, Milton, the Bible—reading that he carried on, as his friend Hogg said, "in season and out of season, at table, in bed, and especially during a walk" until he became one of the most erudite of the English poets. In particular the late works often evince Shelley's study of Plato's (who himself and Symposium he translated) and of the Neoplatonists. The Platonic division of the cosmos into two worlds—the ordinary world of change, mortality, evil, and suffering, which is contrasted with the ideal world of perfect and eternal forms, of which the world of sense experience is only a distant and illusory reflection—was immensely attractive to Shelley. His Adonais set out that contrast memorably: "Life like a dome of many-coloured glass/ Stains the white radiance of eternity" (lines 462–63). At the same time, however, the idealism these lines register as they evoke a beauty that is offset by the "stain" of temporal existence was often, within Shelley's late writings, tempered by his enthusiastic study of British empiricist philosophy, which limits knowledge to what is given in sense experience, and tempered, especially, by the affinities he felt for the radical skepticism of David Hume. Works such as Mont Blanc are shaped by his sense that there are narrow limits to what human beings can know with certainty. Out of this divided intellectual inheritance, Shelley developed, some critics have proposed, a "skeptical idealism," an attitude that also colors the hopes for radical social and political reform that he retained even at a historical moment that seemed (with the restoration of the old autocratic monarchies after 1815, with the suffering of the poor in the economic depression that followed the end of the war) to have delivered an insurmountable setback to the cause of liberty. For him such hopes were moral obligations, more than they were expressions of intellectual certainty. We must continue to hope because, by keeping open the possibility of a better future, hope releases the imaginative and creative powers that are the only means of achieving that end. Shelley had a motto in Italian inscribed on a ring that he often wore: "Il buon tempo verra" ("the good time will come").

When in 1820 the Shelleys settled finally at Pisa, he came closer to finding contentment than at any other time in his adult life. A group of friends, Shelley's "Pisan Circle," gathered around them, including for a while Byron. Byron's friendship with Shelley's affections were Edward Williams, a retired lieutenant of a cavalry regiment serving in India, and his common-law wife, with whom Shelley became infatuated and to whom he addressed some of his
To Wordsworth

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept 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 wert as 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.

c. 1814–15

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

ca. 1814–15