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,
The child of grace and genius. Heartless things
Are done and said i' the world, and many worms
And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth
From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,
In vespers slow or joyous orison.
Now stilts 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,
Worn by the senseless wind, shall live alone
In the frail pauses of this simple strain.
Yet not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting’s woes
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 sob or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clanging hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity.
Nature’s vast frame, the web of human things,
Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
Of waters,—with a sound too half its own,
Such as a feeble brook 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.

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: awe-inspiring
scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice gulfs 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 pines around thee clanging,
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;
Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
Of the eternal waterfall, whose veil
Robes some unsculptured image; the strange sleep
Which when the voices of the desert fail
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;
Thy 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 unceasing 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,

Mont Blanc

Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni

1

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
Mary Shelley wrote together detailing the excursion
that they and Claire Clairmont took in July
1816 to the valley of Chamonix, in what is now
southeastern France. That valley lies at the foot
of Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps
and in all Europe.

In the History of 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 indisciplined overflow of the soul rests
its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate
the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity
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 Chamonix and is fed from above by the melt-
water of the glacier, the Mer de Glace.

In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock drafted in
the same week as "Mont Blanc," Shelley had
recalled that the Count de Buffon, a French pio-
nier of the science we now know as geology, had
proposed a "sublime but gloomy theory"—that
this globe which we inhabit will at some future
time be changed to a mass of frost. This sense,
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 contemporized
throughout "Mont Blanc" with Shelley’s interest,
fueled by his reading of 18th-century skeptics
such as David Hume, in questions about the
human mind, its powers, and the limits of know-
ledge. "All things exist as they are perceived; at
least in relation to the percipient," Shelley 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-
enged by the sheer destructive power of the
mountain.

3. Evening prayer.
4. From the line of Wordsworth’s "Ode:
Intimations of Immortality": "Thoughts that do
often lie too deep for tears."
1. This poem, in which Shelley both echoes and
argues with the poetry of natural description
written by Wordsworth and Coleridge, was first-
published as the conclusion to the History of a

2. i.e., not formed by humans.
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around;
One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest.
In the still cave of the witch Poesy,
Seeking among the shadows that pass by
Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!

Some say that gleams of a remotest world
Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber,
And that its shape the busy thoughts outnumber
Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled
The veil of life and death? or do I lie
In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
Spread far around and inaccessible
Its circles? For the very spirit fails,
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep
That vanishes among the viewless gales!
Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
Blue as the overarching heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steeps;
A desert peopled by the storms alone,
Save when the eagle brings some hunter’s bone,
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven,—Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-demon taught her young
Ruins? Were these their toys? or did a sea
Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?
None can reply—all seems eternal now.
The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,

3. I.e., in the part of the mind that creates poetry.
4. In these difficult lines (41–48) Shelley seems to be recalling Plato’s allegory in the Republic of the mind as cave. Plato describes human beings’ sense of reality as if it were based only on the shadows cast by a firelight on the walls and we remained ignorant of the light of reality outside the cave. The syntax in the passage blurs the distinction between what is inside the human viewer’s mind and outside the world he views: the thoughts (line 41) seek in the poet’s creative faculty (the still cave of the witch Poesy) some “shade,” “phantom,” or “faint image” of the ravine of the Arve, and when the ravine is thereby remembered (when the breast from which the images have fled recalls them), then the ravine exists.
5. A supernatural being, halfway between mortals and the gods. Here it represents the force that makes earthquakes. Shelley views this landscape as the product of violent geological upheavals in the past.
6. Awe-filled open-mindedness.
7. I.e., only through holding such a faith. Drafts of the poem support this reading: Shelley also wrote “In such wise faith, with Nature reconciled” and “In us such a Faith.”
8. The reference is to “voice.” line 80.
9. Intricately formed; derived from Daedalus, builder of the labyrinth in Crete.
10. This description of Mont Blanc in lines 91–116 seems to be an echo of Coleridge’s description of the chasm and sacred river in the recently published “Kubla Khan,” lines 12–24.
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever
Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

5

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high— the power is there,
The still and solemn power of many sights,
And many sounds, and much of life and death.
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there;
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them—Winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow. The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

1816

Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

1

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen amongst us—visiting
This various world with its inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening—
Like clouds in starlight widely spread—
Like memory of music fled—
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

2

Spirit of Beauty, that dost consecrate
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon

1. "Intellectual": nonmaterial, that which is beyond sense.
2. Used as a verb.

Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
Ask why the sunlight not forever
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river,
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shewn?
Why fear and dream and death and birth
Cast on the daylight of this earth
Such gloom,—why man has such a scope
For love and hate, despondency and hope?

3

No voice from some sublimier world hath ever
To sage or poet these responses given—
Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,
Remain the records of their vain endeavour,
Frail spells—whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
From all we hear and all we see,
Doubt, chance, and mutability.

Thy light alone—like mist o'er mountains driven,
Or music by the night wind sent
Through strings of some still instrument,
Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

4

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart
And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
Man was immortal, and omnipotent,
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.
Thou messenger of sympathies,
That wax and wane in lovers' eyes—
Thou—that to human thought art nourishment,
Like darkness to a dying flame!
Depart not as thy shadow came,
Depart not—lest the grave should be,
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

5

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed.

3. The names (line 27) represent nothing better than the feeble guesses that philosophers and poets have made in attempting to answer the questions posed in stanza 2, but these guesses also delude us as though they were magic spells.
4. I.e., "man would be immortal...if thou didst keep."
5. Said to nourish the dying light.
6. Lines 49–52 refer to Shelley's youthful experiments with magic and conjuring. In one manuscript version this line reads "It called on that false name from which our youth is fed," the next line continues, "He answered not." This version would have clinched Shelley's scandalous reputation.
I was not heard—I saw them not—
When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
All vital things that wake to bring
News of buds and blossoming.—
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in exacy!

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bower
Of studious zeal or love’s delight
Outwatched with me the envious night—
They know that never joy illumèd my brow
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldstst free
This world from its dark slavery,
That thou—O awful LOVELINESS,
Wouldst give what’er these words cannot express.

The day becomes more solemn and serene
When noon is past—there is a harmony
In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!
Thus let thy power, which like the truth
Of nature on my passive youth
Descended, to my onward life supply
Its calm—to one who worships thee,
And every form containing thee,
Whom, spirit fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself, and love all human kind.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive; stamped on these lifeless things,
Ozymandias
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

On Love

What is Love? Ask him who lives what is life; ask him who adores what is God.
I know not the internal constitution of other men, nor even of thine whom I now address. I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when, misled by that appearance, I have thought to appeal to something in common and unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a distant and savage Land. The more opportunities they have afforded me for experience, the wider has appeared the interval between us, and to a greater distance have the points of sympathy been withdrawn. With a spirit ill-fitted to sustain such proof, trembling and feeble through its tenderness, I have every where sought, and have found only repulse and disappointment.

Thou dost demand what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood—this is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists. We are born into the world, and there is something within us, which from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness. It is probably in correspondence with this law that the infant drain’s milk from the bosom of its mother; this propensity develops itself with the development of our nature. We dimly see within our intellectual nature, a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all

2. “The hand” is the sculptor’s, who had "mocked" (both imitated and satirized) the sculptured passions; “the heart” is the king’s, which has "fed" his passions.

1. Shelley’s essay, likely composed in the summer of 1818 just after he translated Plato’s Symposium, first appeared in print in The Keepsake for 1829—a miscellany of poems, stories, and engravings. Ozymandias was the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt. Shelley referred to Tennyson as his "nephew." The Keepsake belonged to the group of publications that, debuting in Britain in the 1820s, were known as the "literary annuals;" sumptuously produced, bound in silk, these books were promoted as especially appropriate gifts to be given to young women. Mary Shelley, who supplied Reynolds with her late husband’s manuscript, was herself a frequent contributor to The Keepsake; see "The Mortal Immortal," p. 1036.
that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent and
lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.
Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest
particles of which our nature is composed: a mirror whose surface reflects
only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our own soul that
describes a circle around its proper Paradise, which pain and sorrow and evil
dare not overlap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they
should resemble and correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype; the
meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own; an
imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate
peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret, with
a frame, whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the
accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own;
and a combination of all these in such proportion as the type within demands:
this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain
which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that,
without the possession of which, there is no rest nor respite to the heart over
which it rules. Hence in solitude, or that deserted state when we are
surrounded by human beings and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the
flowers, the grass, the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of
spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our
heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind, and a melody in the flowing
brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them, which by their inconceivable
relation to something within the soul awaken the spirits to dance of breathless
rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes, like the enthusi-
asm of patriotic success, or the voice of one beloved singing to you alone.
Sterne says that if he were in a desert he would love some cypress. So soon as
this want or power is dead, man becomes a living sepulchre of himself, and
what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.

1818

Stanzas Written in Dejection—
December 1818, near Naples

The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent might,
The breath of the moist earth is light
Around its unexpanded buds;
Like many a voice of one delight
The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;
The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

2. These words are ineffectual and metaphorical. Most words are so.—no help! [Shelley's note].
3. Paraphrase of a passage in Sterne's. A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy (1768), in
which the narrator contrasts his approach to traveling with that of travelers less easily pleased:
"was I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it
to call forth my affections."
1. Shelley's first wife, Harriet, had drowned her-
self. Clara, his baby daughter with Mary Shelley,
had just died, and he was plagued by ill health,
pain, financial worries, and the sense that he had
failed as a poet.

1829

SONNET LI

Lift not... the painted veil
Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there
And it but mimic all we would believe
With colours idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear.

2. Probably the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (2nd century C.E.), Stoic philosopher who
wrote twelve books of Meditations.
3. i.e., as I will lament this sweet day when it has gone.
The Mask of Anarchy

On August 16, 1819, a crowd of sixty thousand men, women, and children, gathered on St. Peter’s Field in Manchester to support reform of the system of political representation. The event had been in preparation for months; the organizers aimed to make the gathering a display not just of the people’s numerical strength but also their discipline. On the day, the magistrates sent in the local militia, backed up by a force of saber-wielding cavalry, to arrest one of the speakers, Henry "Orator" Hunt, and to disperse the peaceful, unarmed crowd. In the mayhem, eleven died, and hundreds were injured. The opposition press quickly circulated eyewitness accounts of the events, which came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre. The name invited a comparison to the Battle of Waterloo: that had been viewed as a national glory, but this was a national shame.

Shelley began this protest poem shortly after the news reached him in Italy. Writing, as he reported, in a "torrent of indignation." In September he sent it to Leigh Hunt for publication in Hunt’s journal The Examiner. Justifiably fearful that he would be charged with libel, Hunt postponed its publication until 1832. At that point, with the passage, at last, of a bill reforming Parliament, the concluding vision (in Hunt’s words) of the “rise and growth of the Public Enlightenment” seemed prophetic, and the poem read as a call for peaceful reform, not violent revolution. In the 1832 printing the title was The Masque of Anarchy. That allusion to the masque, the performance genre celebrating aristocrats’ class identity and authority, compounds the poem’s ories. Through the pageantry of the court-masque, seventeenth-century aristocrats had enacted their transcendent of the disorder personified by the vulgar performers of the anti-masque. In the upside-down world of role reversals that Shelley envisions, Anarchy—a term the British government used to stigmatize democratic reform—plays host to aristocratic revels.

The Mask of Anarchy

Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester

As I lay asleep in Italy
There came a voice from over the Sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy.

I met Murder on the way—
He had a mask like Castlereagh—
Very smooth he looked, yet grim:—
Seven bloodhounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one, and two by two,
He tossed them human hearts to chew,
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Next came Fraud, and he had on,
Like Eldon, an ermined gown;—
His big tears, for he wept well,
Turned to mill-stones as they fell.

And the little children, who
Round his feet played to and fro
Thinking every tear a gem,
Had their brains knocked out by them.

Clothed with the Bible, as with light,
And the shadows of the night,
Like Sidmouth, next, Hypocrisy
On a crocodile rode by.

And many more Destructions played
In this hastily masquerade,
All disguised, even to the eyes,
Like Bishops, lawyers, peers or spies.

Last came Anarchy; he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse.

And he wore a kingly crown,
And in his grasp a sceptre shone;
On his brow this mark I saw—
"I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!"