

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 swamped 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 egotism 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 metrical 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.

Mutability

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Striking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

5 Or like forgotten lyres,^o whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last. *wind harps*

10 We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;
We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

15 It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,
The path of its departure still is free:
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but Mutability.

ca. 1814–15

1816

To Wordsworth¹

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.

5 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^o in winter's midnight roar: *small ship*
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
10 Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,²—
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.

if, on the basis of the many echoes of Wordsworth in the opening invocation, we identify the narrator of the story as a Wordsworthian poet for whom the natural world is sufficient to satisfy both the demands of his imagination and his need for community. This narrative poet, it can be assumed, undertakes to tell compassionately, but from his own perspective, the history of a nameless visionary who has surrendered everything in the quest for a goal beyond possibility.

In this early poem, Shelley establishes a form, a conceptual frame, and the imagery for the Romantic quest that he reiterated in his later poems and that also served as a paradigm for many other poems, from Byron's *Manfred* and Keats's *Endymion* to the quest poems of Shelley's later admirer William Butler Yeats. At the same time, in presenting a protagonist who journeys farther and farther east, from Greece onward to Jerusalem and then India, *Alastor* also prefigures story lines that Victorian adventure novels would construct for their empire-building heroes.

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.¹ 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 meaner 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

1. For Shelley's expansion of this account of love as an idealized projection of all that is best in the self, cf. his essay "On Love," p. 791.

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, quærebam quid amarem,
amans amare.—Confess. St. August.*³

Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!
If our great Mother⁴ has imbued my soul
With aught of natural piety⁵ to feel
Your love, and recompense the boon⁶ with mine;⁶
5 If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,⁶
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,⁷
And solemn midnight's tingling silentness;
If autumn's hollow sighs in the sere wood,
And winter robing with pure snow and crowns
10 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
15 And cherished these my kindred; then forgive
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw
No portion of your wonted⁶ favour now!

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

2. Wordsworth's *The Excursion* 1.519–21; 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 compels the tortuous spiritual journey of his life, he later discovered to be the infinite and tran-

scendent God.

4. Nature, invoked as common mother to both the elements and the poet.

5. Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up," lines 8–9: "And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety." Wordsworth also used these lines as the epigraph to his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."

6. I.e., with my love.

7. The sunset colors.

gift
evening

customary

Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
 And my heart ever gazes on the depth
 Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
 In charnels and on coffins, where black death
 25 Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
 Hoping to still these obstinate questionings⁸
 Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
 Thy messenger, to render up the tale
 Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,
 30 When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
 Like an inspired and desperate alchemist
 Staking his very life on some dark hope,
 Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
 With my most innocent love, until strange tears
 35 Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
 Such magic as compels the charmed night
 To render up thy charge: . . . and, though ne'er yet
 Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,
 Enough from incommunicable dream,
 40 And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,
 Has shone within me, that serenely now
 And moveless,⁹ as a long-forgotten lyre
 Suspended in the solitary dome *motionless*
 Of some mysterious and deserted fane,⁹ *temple*
 45 I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
 May modulate with murmurs of the air,⁹
 And motions of the forests and the sea,
 And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
 Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.¹
 50 There was a Poet whose untimely tomb
 No human hands with pious reverence reared,
 But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds
 Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid
 Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—
 55 A lovely youth,—no mourning maiden decked
 With weeping flowers, or votive cypress² wreath,
 The lone couch of his everlasting sleep:—
 Gentle, and brave, and generous,—no lorn⁹ bard
 60 Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh:
 He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude. *abandoned*
 Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,
 And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined
 And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.
 The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn,
 65 And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,
 Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.

8. Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," lines 141–42: "those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things."

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

1. Cf. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 94ff.:

"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.

By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,
 His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
 And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,
 70 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
 75 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
 80 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
 85 With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes³
 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
 90 To avarice or pride, their starry domes
 Of diamond and of gold expand above
 Numberless and immeasurable halls,
 Frequent⁹ with crystal column, and clear shrines *crowded*
 Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.⁴
 95 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,
 100 Until the doves and squirrels would partake
 From his innocuous hand his bloodless food,⁵
 Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks,
 And the wild antelope, that starts when'er
 The dry leaf rustles in the brake,⁹ suspend *thicket*
 105 Her timid steps to gaze upon a form
 More graceful than her own.
 His wandering step
 Obedient to high thoughts, has visited
 The awful⁹ ruins of the days of old: *awe-inspiring*
 Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec,⁶ and the waste
 110 Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers
 Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,
 Memphis and Thebes,⁷ and whatsoever of strange
 Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,

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,
 115 Dark Æthiopia in her desert hills
 Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,
 Stupendous columns, and wild images
 Of more than man, where marble daemons⁸ watch
 The Zodiac's⁹ brazen mystery, and dead men
 120 Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,¹
 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
 125 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,
 130 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,
 135 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
 Wildered,^o and wan, and panting, she returned. *bewildered*

The Poet wandering on, through Arabie
 140 And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,²
 And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down
 Indus and Oxus³ from their icy caves,
 In joy and exultation held his way;
 145 Till in the vale of Cashmire,⁴ 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
 150 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,
 155 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 backward in time to older and older cultures—from the Greeks to the Phoenicians, the Jews, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Finally he reaches Ethiopia (line 115), which had been described as the "cradle of the

sciences."

1. I.e., by quotations inscribed in the stone.

2. A desert in southern Persia.

3. Rivers in Asia.

4. Now known as Kashmir, an Indian state bordered 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. 922.

His inmost sense suspended in its web
 Of many-coloured woof^o and shifting hues. *weave*
 Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
 And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
 160 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^o then *verse*
 She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs
 165 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
 170 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
 175 Its bursting burthen: 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
 180 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,
 185 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
 190 Involved^o and swallowed up the vision; sleep, *wrapped up*
 Like a dark flood suspended in its course,
 Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain.

Roused by the shock he started from his trance—
 The cold white light of morning, the blue moon
 Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,
 195 The distinct valley and the vacant woods,
 Spread round him where he stood. Whither have fled
 The hues of heaven that canopied his bower
 Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,
 The mystery and the majesty of Earth,
 200 The joy, the exultation? His wan eyes
 Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly
 As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.
 The spirit of sweet human love has sent
 A vision to the sleep of him who spurned
 205 Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues
 Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;^o *phantom*
 He overleaps the bounds. Alas! alas!
 Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined

Thus treacherously? Lost, lost, for ever lost,
 210 In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep,
 That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death
 Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,
 O Sleep?⁵ Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,
 And pendent⁶ mountains seen in the calm lake, *jutting, overhanging*
 215 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?
 220 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,
 225 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 precipitates⁷
 230 Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,
 Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight
 O'er the wide æry wilderness:⁶ thus driven
 By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,
 Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,
 235 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
 240 Till vast Aornos seen from Petra's steep⁷
 Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;
 Through Balk,⁸ and where the desolated tombs
 Of Parthian kings⁹ scatter to every wind
 Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,
 245 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
 250 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,

5. I.e., is death the only access to this maiden of his dream?

6. The eagle and serpent locked in mortal combat is 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. "Petra": the rock (literal trans.).

8. Bactria, in ancient Persia, is now part of Afghanistan.

9. The Parthians inhabited northern Persia.

255 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
 260 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,
 265 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 false⁹ names
 Brother, and friend, would press his pallid hand
 270 At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path
 Of his departure from their father's door.

mistaken

At length upon the lone Chorasman shore¹
 He paused, a wide and melancholy waste
 Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged
 275 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.
 280 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.
 285 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
 290 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,² and silent death exposed,
 Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,
 295 With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around.
 There was no fair fiend³ near him, not a sight
 Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.
 A little shallop^o floating near the shore
 300 Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.
 It had been long abandoned, for its sides

small open boat

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.

Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints
Swayed with the undulations of the tide.
A restless impulse urged him to embark
305 And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;
For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves
The slimy caverns of the populous deep.

The day was fair and sunny; sea and sky
Drank its inspiring radiance, and the wind
310 Swept strongly from the shore, blackening the waves.
Following his eager soul, the wanderer
Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft
On the bare mast, and took his lonely seat,
And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea
315 Like a torn cloud before the hurricane.⁴

As one that in a silver vision floats
Obedient to the sweep of odorous winds
Upon resplendent clouds, so rapidly
Along the dark and ruffled waters fled
320 The straining boat.—A whirlwind swept it on,
With fierce gusts and precipitating force,
Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.
The waves arose. Higher and higher still
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's scourge
325 Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.
Calm and rejoicing in the fearful war
Of wave ruining^o on wave, and blast on blast
Descending, and black flood on whirlpool driven
With dark obliterating course, he sate:
330 As if their genii were the ministers
Appointed to conduct him to the light
Of those beloved eyes, the Poet sate
Holding the steady helm. Evening came on,
The beams of sunset hung their rainbow hues
335 High 'mid the shifting domes of sheeted spray
That canopied his path o'er the waste deep;
Twilight, ascending slowly from the east,
Entwin'd in duskier wreaths her braided locks
O'er the fair front and radiant eyes of day;
340 Night followed, clad with stars. On every side
More horribly the multitudinous streams
Of ocean's mountainous waste to mutual war
Rushed in dark tumult thundering, as to mock
The calm and spangled sky. The little boat
345 Still fled before the storm; still fled, like foam
Down the steep cataract of a wintry river;

4. If the Poet's boat is being carried upstream on the Oxus 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 for this journey is the Caspian Sea, in which case the journey would end near the traditional site of the Garden of Eden.

crashing

Now pausing on the edge of the riven^o wave;
Now leaving far behind the bursting mass
That fell, convulsing ocean. Safely fled—
350 As if that frail and wasted human form,
Had been an elemental god.⁵

At midnight
The moon arose: and lo! the ethereal cliffs⁶
Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone
Among the stars like sunlight, and around
355 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,
360 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
365 Ingulphed the rushing sea. The boat fled on
With unrelaxing speed.—"Vision and Love!"
The Poet cried aloud, "I have beheld
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death
Shall not divide us long!"

The boat pursued
370 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,
375 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;
380 Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,
Circling immeasurably fast, and laved^o
With alternating dash the knarled roots
Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms
In darkness over it. I' the midst was left,
385 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,
390 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

torn asunder

washed

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
 395 Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
 Of that resistless gulph 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
 400 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 embowering trees recede, and leave
 405 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,
 410 Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,
 Or falling 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,
 415 And he forbore.⁷ 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.
 420 The noonday sun
 Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass
 Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence
 A narrow vale embosoms. There, huge caves,
 Scooped in the dark base of their aëry rocks
 425 Mocking⁸ its moans, respond and roar for ever.
 The meeting boughs and implicated^o 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,
 430 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
 435 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,
 440 Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around

7. The "yellow flowers" overhanging their own reflection (lines 406–8), probably narcissus, may signify the narcissistic temptation of the Poet to be satisfied with a projection of his own self. But his need for an unearthly Other revives, and "the

strong impulse" (line 415) drives him on.
 8. As often in Shelley, "mocking" has a double sense: mimicking as well as ridiculing the sounds of the forest (line 421).

The grey trunks, and, as gamesome 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
 445 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,
 450 Fragrant with perfumed herbs, and eyed with blooms
 Minute yet beautiful. One darkest glen
 Sends from its woods of musk-rose, twined with jasmine,
 A soul-dissolving odour, to invite
 To some more lovely mystery. Through the dell,
 455 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,
 460 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,
 465 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
 470 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
 475 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
 480 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,
 485 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,
 490 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
 495 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:
 500 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?
 505 Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
 Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,
 Thy searchless⁹ fountain, and invisible course
 Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,
 And measureless ocean may declare as soon
 510 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
 515 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,
 520 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
 525 The forest’s solemn canopies were changed
 For the uniform and lightsome¹⁰ evening sky.
 Grey rocks did peep from the spare moss, and stemmed
 The struggling brook: tall spires of windlestrae⁹
 Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope,
 530 And nought but knarled roots¹ 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
 535 And white, and where irradiate¹⁰ 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
 540 The stream, that with a larger volume now
 Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there

9. Windlestraw (Scottish dial.); tall, dried stalks of grass.

1. Probably an error for “stumps” or “trunks.”

Fretted a path through its descending curves
 With its wintry speed. On every side now rose
 Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,
 545 Lifted their black and barren pinnacles
 In the light of evening, and its precipice²
 Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,
 Mid toppling stones, black gulphs and yawning caves,
 Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues
 550 To the loud stream. Lo! 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 the wan stars and descending moon
 555 Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,
 Dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom
 Of leaden-coloured even, and fiery hills
 Mingling their flames with twilight, on the verge
 Of the remote horizon. The near³ scene,
 560 In naked and severe simplicity,
 Made contrast with the universe. A pine,³
 Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy
 Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast
 Yielding one only response, at each pause
 565 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
 570 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,
 575 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,
 580 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,
 585 Red, yellow, or etherially 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
 590 The stillness of its solitude:—one voice
 Alone inspired its echoes,—even that voice

2. Headlong fall (of the stream, line 540).

3. Pine trees in Shelley often signify persistence and steadfastness amid change and vicissitudes.

Which hither came, floating among the winds,
 And led the loveliest among human forms
 To make their wild haunts the depository
 595 Of all the grace and beauty that endured
 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,
 600 Commit the colours of that varying cheek,
 That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

The dim and horned⁴ moon hung low, and poured
 A sea of lustre on the horizon's verge
 That overflowed its mountains. Yellow mist
 605 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!
 610 Whose sightless⁵ speed divides this sullen night:
 And thou, colossal Skeleton,^o that, still
 Guiding its irresistible career
 In thy devastating omnipotence,
 Art king of this frail world, from the red field
 615 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
 620 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,
 630 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
 635 Reclined his languid head, his limbs did rest,
 Diffused and motionless, on the smooth brink
 Of that obscurest^o chasm;—and thus he lay,
 Surrendering to their final impulses
 The hovering powers of life. Hope and despair,
 640 The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear

4. The moon is crescent shaped with the points rising, as in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode": "the

new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms."

5. Invisible, or perhaps "unseeing."

Death

darkest

Marred his repose, the influxes of sense,
 And his own being unalloyed by pain,
 Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed
 The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there
 645 At peace, and faintly smiling:—his last sight
 Was the great moon, which o'er the western line
 Of the wide world her mighty horn suspended,
 With whose dun^o beams inwoven darkness seemed
 To mingle. Now upon the jagged hills
 650 It rests, and still as the divided frame
 Of the vast meteor⁶ sunk, the Poet's blood,
 That ever beat in mystic sympathy
 With nature's ebb and flow, grew feebler still:
 And when two lessening points of light alone
 655 Gleamed through the darkness, the alternate gasp
 Of his faint respiration scarce did stir
 The stagnate night:⁷—till the minutest ray
 Was quenched, the pulse yet lingered in his heart.
 It paused—it fluttered. But when heaven remained
 660 Utterly black, the murky shades involved
 An image, silent, cold, and motionless,
 As their own voiceless earth and vacant air.
 Even as a vapour^o fed with golden beams
 That ministered on⁸ sunlight, ere the west
 665 Eclipses it, was now that wonderous frame—
 No sense, no motion, no divinity—
 A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings
 The breath of heaven did wander—a bright stream
 Once fed with many-voiced waves—a dream
 670 Of youth, which night and time have quenched for ever,
 Still, dark, and dry, and unremembered now.

O, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,
 Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam
 With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale
 675 From vernal blooms fresh fragrance!⁹ O, that God,
 Profuse of poisons, would concede the chalice
 Which but one living man¹ has drained, who now,
 Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels
 No proud exemption in the blighting curse
 680 He bears, over the world wanders for ever,
 Lone as incarnate death! O, that the dream
 Of dark magician in his visioned cave,²
 Raking the cinders of a crucible
 For life and power, even when his feeble hand

6. I.e., the moon. The word *meteor* was once used for any phenomenon in the skies, as our modern term "meteorology" suggests.

7. The ebbing of the Poet's life parallels the descent of the "horned moon," to the moment when only the two "points of light"—its horns—show above the hills.

8. Attended, acted as a servant to.

9. Medea brewed a magic potion to rejuvenate the dying Aeson; where some of the potion spilled on the ground, flowers sprang up (Ovid,

Metamorphoses 7.275ff.).

1. The Wandering Jew. According to a medieval legend, he had taunted Christ on the way to the crucifixion and was condemned to wander the world, deathless, until Christ's second coming.
 2. Cave in which he has visions. "Dark magician": an alchemist attempting to produce the elixir of enduring life. Alchemy intrigued both Shelleys. See Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" (p. 1036).

685 Shakes in its last decay, were the true law
 Of this so lovely world! But thou art fled
 Like some frail exhalation;^o 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 i' the world, and many worms
 And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth
 From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,
 In vesper³ low or joyous orison,^o
 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
 700 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,
 705 Worn by the senseless^o wind, shall live alone
 In the frail pauses 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
 710 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 woe too "deep for tears,"⁴ when all
 Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
 715 Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
 Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
 The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
 But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
 Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
 720 Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

mist

prayer

unfeeling

1815

1816

Mont Blanc¹

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—

3. Evening prayer.

4. From the last 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*

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 feeble brook will oft assume
 In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
 10 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
 15 Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awful^o scene,
 Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
 From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne,
 Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
 Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie,
 20 Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,
 Children of elder^o 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;
 25 Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
 Of the ethereal waterfall, whose veil
 Robes some unsculptured² image; the strange sleep
 Which when the voices of the desert fail
 Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—
 30 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 unresting sound—
 Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
 35 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
 To muse on my own separate phantasy,

awe-inspiring

earlier, ancient

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 Chamouni, 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* 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 overflowing 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 spanning the river Arve, which flows through the valley of Chamouni and is fed from above by the melt-off 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 pioneer 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 period 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 counterposed 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 knowledge. "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 challenged by the sheer destructive power of the mountain.

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