to express an exultation so unmeasured in the news, and its details, as gave to her the appearance which amongst Celtic Highlanders is called *fey*. This was at some little town, I forget what, where we happened to change horses near midnight. Some fair or wake had kept the people up out of their beds. We saw many lights moving about as we drew near; and perhaps the most impressive scene on our route was our reception at this place. The flashing of torches and the beautiful radiance of blue lights (technically Bengal lights) upon the heads of our horses; the fine effect of such a showery and ghostly illumination falling upon flowers and glittering laurels, whilst all around the massy darkness seemed to invest us with walls of impenetrable blackness, together with the prodigious enthusiasm of the people, composed a picture at once scenical and affecting. As we staid for three or four minutes, I alighted. And immediately from a dismantled stall in the street, where perhaps she had been presiding at some part of the evening, advanced eagerly a middle-aged woman. The sight of my newspaper it was that had drawn her attention upon myself. The victory which we were carrying down to the provinces on *this* occasion was the imperfect one of Talavera.[2] I told her the main outline of the battle. But her agitation, though not the agitation of fear, but of exultation rather, and enthusiasm, had been so conspicuous when listening, and when first applying for information, that I could not but ask her if she had not some relation in the Peninsular army. Oh! yes: her only son was there. In what regiment? He was a trooper in the 23rd Dragoons. My heart sank within me as she made that answer. This sublime regiment, which an Englishman should never mention without raising his hat to their memory, had made the most memorable and effective charge recorded in military annals. They leaped their horse—*over* a trench, where they could: *into* it, and with the result of death or mutilation when they could *not*. What proportion cleared the trench is nowhere stated. Those who *did*, closed up and went down upon the enemy with such divinity of fervour—(I use the word *divinity* by design: the inspiration of God must have prompted this movement to those whom even then he was calling to his presence)—that two results followed. As regarded the enemy, this 23rd Dragoons, not, I believe, originally 350 strong, paralysed a French column, 6000 strong, then ascending the hill, and fixed the gaze of the whole French army. As regarded themselves, the 23rd were supposed at first to have been all but annihilated; but eventually, I believe, not so many as one in four survived. And this, then, was the regiment—a regiment already for some hours known to myself and all London as stretched, by a large majority, upon one bloody aceldama[3]—in which the young trooper served whose mother was now talking with myself in a spirit of such hopeful enthusiasm. Did I tell her the truth? Had I the heart to break up her dream? No. I said to myself, Tomorrow, or the next day, she will hear the worst. For this night, wherefore should she not sleep in peace? After tomorrow, the chances are too many that peace will forsake her pillow. This brief respite, let her owe this to *my* gift and *my* forbearance. But, if I told her not of the bloody price that had been paid, there was no reason for suppressing the contributions from her son's regiment to the service and glory of the day. For the very

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 in 1807 and then of Spain, France's former ally, in 1808. Casualties on both sides were immense.

3. Field of blood; Acts 1.19.

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 wearied 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.

* * *

1849

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 befitted 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 *Laon and Cythna*:

> 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." I then 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

philosophy and scorn of orthodoxy. Shelley at this early date had already published, anonymously, two Gothic novels and three slim volumes of verse, including his recently rediscovered *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things*, an antiwar 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 warmhearted 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 compel her to go to school." Harriet threw herself on Shelley's protection, and "gratitude and admiration," he wrote, "all 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 of age; his bride, sixteen. The couple moved restlessly from place to place, living on a small allowance granted reluctantly by their families. In February 1812, accompanied by Harriet's 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 that oppressed and poverty-stricken people.

Back 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 "invulnerable" 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 visions of the woeful past, a dreadful present, and a utopian future. Queen Mab's denunciations of institutional religion, aristocracy, and monarchy are elaborated at length in the poem's many endnotes. These atheistic 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, fled to France with Mary (taking along her stepsister, Claire Clairmont), and—in accordance with his belief in nonexclusive love—invited Harriet to come live with them 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 people 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 warmhearted 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 poetic 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 of incest and parricide, *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 view 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 (whose *Ion* 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 and the swashbuckling Cornishman Edward Trelawny. Chief in Shelley's affections were Edward Williams, a retired lieutenant of a cavalry regiment serving in India, and his common-law wife Jane, with whom Shelley became infatuated and to whom he addressed some of his

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,
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:
5 Or like forgotten lyres,° whose dissonant strings — *wind harps*
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last.

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

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

ca. 1814–15 — 1816

To Wordsworth[1]

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° 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.