

15 Is the theme of their debate,
Wrinkling their red gills the while—

Are ye—two vultures sick for battle,
Two scorpions under one wet stone,
Two bloodless wolves whose dry throats rattle,
Two crows perched on the murrained² cattle,
20 Two vipers tangled into one.

1819

Ode to the West Wind¹

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

5 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic² red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring³ shall blow

10 Her clarion⁴ o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver;⁵ hear, O hear!

2

15 Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like Earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

1832

Angels⁶ of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Mænad,⁷ even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou Dirge

25 Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours,⁸ from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain and fire and hail will burst: O hear!

clouds

3

30 Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,⁸

Beside a pumice isle in Baia's bay,⁹
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

35 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

40 Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves:¹ O hear!

4

45 If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be

6. In the old sense of messengers.

7. A female worshiper who danced frenziedly in the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus), the Greek god of wine and vegetation. As vegetation god he was fabled to die in the fall and to be resurrected in the spring.

8. The currents that flow in the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes with a visible difference in color.

built in the glory days of imperial Rome. Their ruins are reflected in the waters of the bay, a sight Mary Shelley also describes in the Introduction to *The Last Man* (see p. 1032).

1. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea . . . sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it [Shelley's note].

2. A *murrain* is a malignant disease of domestic animals.

1. This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains [Shelley's note]. As in other major Romantic poems—e.g., the opening of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and the conclusion to Shelley's *Adonais*—the rising wind, linked with the cycle of the seasons, is presented as the correspondent in the external world to an inner change, a burst of creative power. In many languages the words for *wind*, *breath*, *soul*, and *inspiration* are identical or related. Thus Shelley's west wind is a "spirit" (the Latin *spiritus*: "wind," "breath," "soul," and the root word for *inspiration*), the "breath of Autumn's

being," which on earth, sky, and sea destroys in autumn to revive in the spring. In some philosophical histories written in Shelley's period, the spirit of liberty was said to have deserted Europe for the Americas. In blowing from the west, the wind may carry liberty back again.

Shelley's sonnet-length stanza, developed from the interlaced three-line units of the Italian *terza rima* (*aba bcb cdc*, etc.), consists of a set of four such tercets, closed by a couplet rhyming with the middle line of the preceding tercet: *aba bcb cdc ded ee*.

2. Referring to the kind of fever that occurs in tuberculosis.

3. The west wind that will blow in the spring.

4. A high, shrill trumpet.

5. Refers to the Hindu gods Siva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Preserver.

50 The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

55 A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

5

Make me thy lyre,² even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!³
65 And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

70 The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

1819

1820

Prometheus Unbound Shelley composed this work in Italy between the autumn of 1818 and the close of 1819 and published it the following summer. Upon its completion he wrote in a letter, "It is a drama, with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted; and I think the execution is better than any of my former attempts." It is based on the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, which dramatizes the sufferings of Prometheus, unrepentant champion of humanity, who, because he had stolen fire from heaven, was condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Caucasus and to be tortured by a vulture feeding on his liver; in a lost sequel Aeschylus reconciled Prometheus with his oppressor. Shelley continued Aeschylus's story but transformed it into a symbolic drama about the origin of evil and the possibility of overcoming it. In such early writings as *Queen Mab*, Shelley had expressed his belief that injustice and suffering could be eliminated by an external revolution that would wipe out or radically reform the causes of evil, attributed to existing social, political, and religious institutions. Implicit in *Prometheus Unbound*, on the other hand, is the view that both evil and the possibility of reform are the moral

2. The Eolian lyre, which responds to the wind with rising and falling musical chords.
3. This line may play on the secondary sense of "leaves" as pages in a book.

responsibility of men and women. Social chaos and wars are a gigantic projection of human moral disorder and inner division and conflict; tyrants are the outer representatives of the tyranny of our baser over our better elements; hatred for others is a product of self-contempt; and external political reform is impossible unless we have first reformed our own nature at its roots, by substituting selfless love for divisive hatred. Shelley thus incorporates into his secular myth—of universal regeneration by a triumph of humanity's moral imagination—the ethical teaching of Christ on the Mount, together with the classical morality represented in the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus.

FROM PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts

Audisne hæc Amphiaræ, sub terram abdite?¹

Preface

The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion. They by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their rivals and predecessors. Such a system would have amounted to a resignation of those claims to preference over their competitors which incited the composition. The Agamemnonian story was exhibited on the Athenian theatre with as many variations as dramas.

I have presumed to employ a similar licence.—The *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus, supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim as the price of the disclosure of the danger threatened to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis. Thetis, according to this view of the subject, was given in marriage to Peleus, and Prometheus by the permission of Jupiter delivered from his captivity by Hercules.²—Had I framed my story on this model I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus; an ambition, which, if my preference to this mode of treating the subject had incited me to cherish, the recollection of the high comparison such an attempt would challenge, might well abate. But in truth I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary. The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is

1. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.60: "Do you hear this, O Amphiaræus, concealed under the earth?" In Greek myth Amphiaræus was a seer. Fleeing from an unsuccessful assault on Thebes, he was saved from his pursuers by Zeus, who by a thunderbolt opened a cleft in the earth that swallowed him up.

In his *Disputations* Cicero is arguing for the Stoic doctrine of the need to master pain and suffering. He quotes this line (a Latin translation from Aeschylus's lost drama *Epigoni*) in the

course of an anecdote about Dionysius of Heraclea, who, tormented by kidney stones, abjures the doctrine of his Stoic teacher Zeno that pain is not an evil. By way of reproof his fellow-Stoic Cleanthes strikes his foot on the ground and utters this line. Cicero interprets it as an appeal to Zeno the Stoic master (under the name of Amphiaræus).

2. Shelley's description of the subject of Aeschylus's lost drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, is a speculation based on surviving fragments.

Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry³ which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.

This Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air. The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening of spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.

The imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. This is unusual in modern Poetry; although Dante and Shakespeare are full of instances of the same kind: Dante indeed more than any other poet and with greater success. But the Greek poets, as writers to whom no resource of awakening the sympathy of their contemporaries was unknown, were in the habitual use of this power, and it is the study of their works (since a higher merit would probably be denied me) to which I am willing that my readers should impute this singularity.

One word is due in candour to the degree in which the study of contemporary writings may have tinged my composition, for such has been a topic of censure with regard to poems far more popular, and indeed more deservedly popular than mine. It is impossible that any one who inhabits the same age with such writers as those who stand in the foremost ranks of our own, can conscientiously assure himself, that his language and tone of thought may not have been modified by the study of the productions of those extraordinary intellects. It is true, that, not the spirit of their genius, but the forms in which it has manifested itself, are due, less to the peculiarities of their own minds, than to the peculiarity of the moral and intellectual condition of the minds among which they have been produced. Thus a number of writers possess the form, whilst they want the spirit of those whom, it is alleged, they imitate; because the former is the endowment of the age in which they live, and the latter must be the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind.

The peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery which distinguishes the modern literature of England, has not been, as a general power, the product of the imitation of any particular writer. The mass of capabilities remains at every period materially the same; the circumstances which awaken it to action perpetually change. If England were divided into forty republics, each equal in population and extent to Athens, there is no reason

3. Slippery reasoning.

to suppose but that, under institutions not more perfect than those of Athens, each would produce philosophers and poets equal to those who (if we except Shakespeare) have never been surpassed. We owe the great writers of the golden age of our literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian Religion. We owe Milton to the progress and development of the same spirit; the sacred Milton was, let it ever be remembered, a Republican,⁴ and a bold enquirer into morals and religion. The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored.⁵

As to imitation; Poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them: one great poet is a masterpiece of nature, which another not only ought to study but must study. He might as wisely and as easily determine that his mind should no longer be the mirror of all that is lovely in the visible universe, as exclude from his contemplation the beautiful which exists in the writings of a great contemporary. The pretence of doing it would be a presumption in any but the greatest; the effect, even in him, would be strained, unnatural and ineffectual. A Poet, is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others, and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers; he is not one, but both. Every man's mind is in this respect modified by all the objects of nature and art, by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are in one sense the creators and in another the creations of their age. From this subjection the loftiest do not escape. There is a similarity between Homer and Hesiod, between Æschylus and Euripides, between Virgil and Horace, between Dante and Petrarch, between Shakespeare and Fletcher, between Dryden and Pope; each has a generic resemblance under which their specific distinctions are arranged. If this similarity be the result of imitation, I am willing to confess that I have imitated.

Let this opportunity be conceded to me of acknowledging that I have, what a Scotch philosopher characteristically terms, "a passion for reforming the world:"⁶ what passion incited him to write and publish his book, he omits to explain. For my part I had rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus.⁷ But it is a mistake to suppose

4. I.e., Milton hoped that the overthrow of the monarchy during the Civil War would lead to England's rebirth as a republic.

5. See Shelley's similar tribute to his great contemporaries in the concluding paragraph of his "Defence of Poetry" (p. 883).

6. This is the title of chap. 16 in *The Principles of Moral Science* (1805), by the Scottish writer Robert Forsyth.

7. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) argued that the rate of increase in population will soon exceed the rate of increase in the food supply necessary to sustain it. William Paley wrote *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), which undertakes to prove that the design apparent in natural phenomena, and especially in the human body, entails the existence of God as the great Designer. Shelley ironically expresses his

that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness. Should I live to accomplish what I purpose, that is, produce a systematical history of what appear to me to be the genuine elements of human society,⁸ let not the advocates of injustice and superstition flatter themselves that I should take Æschylus rather than Plato as my model.

The having spoken of myself with unaffected freedom will need little apology with the candid; and let the uncandid consider that they injure me less than their own hearts and minds by misrepresentation. Whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them: if his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown.

Prometheus Unbound

Act I

SCENE: A Ravine of Icy Rocks in the Indian Caucasus. PROMETHEUS is discovered bound to the Precipice. PANTHEA and IONE¹ are seated at his feet. Time, Night. During the Scene, Morning slowly breaks.

PROMETHEUS Monarch of Gods and Dæmons,² and all Spirits

But One,³ who throng those bright and rolling Worlds

Which Thou and I alone of living things

Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this Earth

Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou

Requitest for knee-worship, prayer and praise,

And toil, and hecatombs⁴ of broken hearts,

With fear and self contempt and barren hope;

Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless⁵ in hate,

Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,

O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.—

Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours

And moments—aye⁶ divided by keen pangs

Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,

blinded

always

contempt for the doctrines of both these thinkers, which he conceives as arguments for accepting uncomplainingly the present state of the world.

8. Shelley did not live to write this history.

1. Ione, Panthea, and Asia (introduced in the following scene) are sisters and Oceanids; i.e.,

daughters of Oceanus.

2. Supernatural beings, intermediaries between gods and mortals.

3. Demogorgon (see 2.4). Prometheus is addressing Jupiter.

4. Large sacrificial offerings.

Scorn and despair,—these are mine empire:—

More glorious far than that which thou surveyest

From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!

Almighty, had I deigned⁵ to share the shame

Of thine ill tyranny, and hung not here

Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain,

Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,⁶ *vegetation*

Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life.

Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever!

No change, no pause, no hope!—Yet I endure.

I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?

I ask yon Heaven—the all-beholding Sun,

Has it not seen? The Sea, in storm or calm,

Heaven's ever-changing Shadow, spread below—

Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?

Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever!

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears

Of their moon-freezing chrystals; the bright chains

Eat with their burning cold into my bones.

Heaven's winged hound, polluting from thy lips

His beak in poison not his own, tears up

My heart;⁶ and shapeless sights come wandering by,

The ghastly people of the realm of dream,

Mocking me: and the Earthquake-fiends are charged

To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds

When the rocks split and close again behind;

While from their loud abysses howling throng

The genii of the storm, urging the rage

Of whirlwind, and afflict me with keen hail.

And yet to me welcome is Day and Night,

Whether one breaks the hoar frost of the morn,

Or starry, dim, and slow, the other climbs

The leaden-coloured East; for then they lead

Their wingless, crawling Hours,⁷ one among whom

—As some dark Priest hales⁸ the reluctant victim—

Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood

From these pale feet,⁸ which then might trample thee

If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.

Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.⁹—What Ruin

Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!

How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,

Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief,

Not exultation, for I hate no more,

As then, ere misery made me wise.—The Curse

5. I.e., you would have been all-powerful, if I had deigned.

6. The vulture, tearing daily at Prometheus's heart, was kissed by Jupiter by way of reward.

7. The Hours were represented in Greek myth and art by human figures with wings.

8. One of a number of implied parallels between

the agony of Prometheus and the passion of Christ.

9. At this early point occurs the crisis of the action: the beginning of Prometheus's change of heart from hate to compassion, consummated in lines 303–05.