

observes the renovation of mankind, as all ugly shapes and images depart upon the winds:

and those

From whom they passed seemed mild and lovely forms  
After some foul disguise had fallen

In Blake this would be followed by something strenuous; in Shelley it flows on with an urbane rhythm, as the marvelous is civilized into the ordinary:

and all

Were somewhat changed, and after brief surprise  
And greetings of delighted wonder, all  
Went to their sleep again

The "somewhat" is masterly; the "brief" not less so, and the concluding turn a triumph of gracious underemphasis.

This spirit of urbanity is so prevalent in Shelley that one learns to distrust the accuracy of any critic who finds Shelley's poetry shrill, without humor, self-centered, or exhibiting only "primary impulses." Ideologically Shelley is of the permanent Left, in politics and religion, and his morality insists on the right of private judgment in every possible human matter. He is nothing short of an extremist, and knew it; he says of himself, "I go on until I am stopped, and I never am stopped." Perhaps it is inevitable that so passionately individual a poet will always make ideological enemies. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that such enemies will in time cease to misrepresent Shelley's poetry, and not continue to pretend to an aesthetic condemnation that is usually a mask for their own sense of moral and religious outrage.

## 2. The Quest:

### ALASTOR

In the autumn of 1815 Shelley, aged twenty-three, composed a blank-verse rhapsody of 720 lines, a quest-romance called *Alastor* (Greek for "avenging demon") or *The Spirit of Solitude*. This is his first poem of consequence, and is already both characteristic of

his genius and premonitory of the development he was to undergo in the less than seven years that remained to him. The burden of *Alastor* is despair of the human condition. A preface sets forth the two possible fates the poem assigns to mankind:

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.

That Power is the Imagination, in its Wordsworthian formulation, and it brings with it a choice between two kinds of destruction: the Poet's solitude and the unimaginative man's lonely gregariousness. The second, less luminous destruction is ignored in *Alastor*, and receives no adequate treatment in Shelley until his last poem, *The Triumph of Life*. The first becomes a quest for a finite and measured object of desire which shall yet encompass in itself the beauty and truth of the infinite and unmeasured conceptions of the Poet. This quest is necessarily in vain, and leads to the untimely death of the quester.

Such a theme would not have been acceptable to Wordsworth or Coleridge, and yet is the legitimate offspring of their own art and imaginative theory. Indeed *Alastor* is prompted by *The Excursion*, and echoes both the *Intimations* ode and *Kubla Khan*. It seemed to the young Shelley that Wordsworth and Coleridge had inaugurated a mode, liberated an imaginative impulse, but then had repudiated their own creation. With *Alastor*, Shelley published a sonnet addressed to Wordsworth and a powerful lyric ("Oh! there are spirits of the air"), which Mrs. Shelley says was addressed to Coleridge. The sonnet to Wordsworth opens with direct reference to the Great Ode's theme of loss:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know  
That things depart which never may return

To this Shelley now adds the loss of Wordsworth himself, who has ceased to be what he was, a maker of "songs consecrate to truth and liberty." The sonnet fails by excessive externalization of Wordsworth's supposed apostasy. Shelley, though more influenced by Wordsworth, felt a closer temperamental affinity with Coleridge,

and his lyric to Coleridge is remarkable for its inventive reading of a nature he believed akin to his own:

With mountain winds, and babbling springs,  
 And moonlight seas, that are the voice  
 Of these inexplicable things,  
 Thou didst hold commune, and rejoice  
 When they did answer thee; but they  
 Cast, like a worthless boon, thy love away.

"These inexplicable things" are the manifestation abroad of the One Life that is also within us. For a while Nature held commune with Coleridge, but finally broke off the dialogue and cast the poet's love away:

Ah! wherefore didst thou build thine hope  
 On the false earth's inconstancy?  
 Did thine own mind afford no scope  
 Of love, or moving thoughts to thee?  
 That natural scenes or human smiles  
 Could steal the power to wind thee in their wiles?

This is exactly contrary to Coleridge's own reading of his crisis in *Dejection*, where Nature lives only insofar as we give it something of our own life. Nature, Shelley insists, has its own life, but apart from us, and is necessarily false and inconstant to us. Or, to put it as a contrary of Wordsworth's language, Nature always will and must betray the human heart that loves her, for Nature, whether operative in "natural scenes or human smiles," is not adequate to meet the demands made upon her by the human imagination. So, from the beginning, Shelley takes his position with Blake as against Wordsworth.

But how will the poet's soul react when he at last realizes that "the glory of the moon is dead"? Your own soul, Shelley observes to Coleridge, still is true to you, but the misery of loss makes it only a specter of what it was, and this specter of departed power haunts Coleridge like a fiend:

This fiend, whose ghastly presence ever  
 Beside thee like thy shadow hangs,  
 Dream not to chase;—the mad endeavour  
 Would scourge thee to severer pangs.

Be as thou art. Thy settled' fate,  
 Dark as it is, all change would aggravate.

That is hardly kind, but Shelley, young and intense, is finally not much kinder to himself in *Alastor*, where the doomed quester is clearly the poem's maker. This last stanza of the lyric to Coleridge is an exact analogue to Blake's theory of Spectre and Emanation. The composite form of all the poet creates or loves, his Emanation, does emanate from him when he is still in possession of the Joy of Imagination. But when it exists as a mere external form, independent of him, it is likely to seem mocking and tantalizing. In response to this mockery, his sense of self may seek refuge in abstractions, as Coleridge's does in *Dejection*, until the self and the abstraction merge into the menacing and self-accusing figure of the Spectre. You are in your Spectre's power, Shelley's poem warns Coleridge, and a continued struggling will only intensify that power, and aggravate an already darkly settled fate.

Shelley ends the preface to *Alastor* by ironically quoting the Wanderer's introduction to the tragic tale of Margaret in Book I of *The Excursion*:

The good die first,  
 And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust,  
 Burn to the socket!

In the light of the poems printed with *Alastor*, Wordsworth and Coleridge are held among those who burn to the socket. The poem *Alastor* is itself a prophetic celebration of Shelley's own career, moving rapidly toward a more dramatic "sudden darkness and extinction." Only the image is inappropriate, for Shelley's heart did not find its hoped-for death by the fire of his own desires, but by the watery waste of the world of experience.

*Alastor* opens with a Wordsworthian invocation of Nature as "Great Parent." Speaking as the element of fire, the poet addresses earth, ocean, and air as his brothers, and claims a "natural piety" that enables him to feel their love and to offer his own in recompense. Yet, like Wordsworth's Child in the Great Ode, he has felt "obstinate questionings of thee and thine," of Nature and her phenomenal manifestations. But Nature has not yet unveiled her inmost sanctuary, and he is puzzled as to the mystery "of what we

are." Like Coleridge and Wordsworth, he calls upon Nature for a greater measure of inspiration, and offers himself up to the wind as an aeolian lyre:

that serenely now  
 And moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre  
 Suspended in the solitary dome  
 Of some mysterious and deserted fane,  
 I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain  
 May modulate with murmurs of the air,  
 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.

To modulate with is to adjust to a certain measure or proportion, yet the strain need not be lost in the music of Nature. The poem's music is toned down by the melody of earth and air, but still strives for distinctness.

Shelley begins his story of a Poet with a vision of an untimely tomb built by moldering leaves in the waste wilderness. Not hands, but "the charmed eddies of autumnal winds" have built this sad monument to one who lived, died, and sang in solitude. He began as a Wordsworthian poet must, with every natural sight and sound sending to his heart its choicest influences. Leaving an alienated home behind him, he sets forth to seek strange truths, and to pursue "Nature's most secret steps" to their *Kubla Khan*-like sources:

where the secret caves  
 Rugged and dark, winding among the springs  
 Of fire and poison, inaccessible  
 To avarice or pride, their starry domes  
 Of diamond and of gold expand . . .

In this quest for the secret spring of things the Poet is oblivious of the love felt for him by an Arab maiden. Instead he has a vision of a veiled maid whose voice is like that of his own soul and the themes of whose converse are his own. They meet in love; sleep returns, and the Poet awakens to find her gone:

His wan eyes  
 Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly  
 As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.

He is as empty as the scene, and his eyes are now only a reflection of the ideal he has loved. As in *Endymion*, which is influenced by *Alastor*, the Poet now pursues his quest with renewed intensity and hopelessness. The sexual element changes the nature of the poem, as Shelley intended it to do. Wordsworth, in his disciple's view, was sexually timid in not directly associating the poet's love of Nature with his love of woman. If sight and sound send to the heart its choicest impulses, then surely the other senses are also natural modes of imaginative discernment. The quest for the hiding places of natural power is now also a quest for complete sensual fulfillment.

The Poet wanders on, driven by the bright shadow of his dream, and enters into a premature autumn of the body. He rejects the gentle advances of youthful maidens, for he is pursued now by his own Spectre, the *alastor* or avenging demon of his self-chosen solitude.

He moves on to the foothills of the Caucasus, retracing in reverse the march of civilization. Though most of the poem until the climax is scenery, it is scenery charged with a furious energy of perception, for all of it shudders at the edge of the destructive ideal toward which the Poet surges. When he dies, his ideal still unattainable, his life ebbs and flows as the great horned moon goes down. What is left behind is not "the passionate tumult of a clinging hope" but:

cold tranquillity,  
Nature's vast frame, the web of human things

Beautiful and extreme as it is, *Alastor* remains a dead end, as any poem of a ruined quest must be, for it closes in a wasteland from which no salvation is possible. Half a year later, in the summer of 1816, in the Swiss Alps and lakes, and frequently in the company of Byron, Shelley found his way out of this premature vision of despair. He found, in one startling revelation, both myth and poetic technique, and did not abandon them until the end.

## 3. The Hidden Power:

## HYMN TO INTELLECTUAL BEAUTY

Voyaging round the Lake of Geneva with Byron, Shelley occupied himself by reading Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* for the first time. Rousseau's influence is added to Wordsworth's in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, conceived at this time. "Intellectual" in the title simply means "spiritual," or "beyond the senses." The poem's subject is very nearly that of the *Intimations* ode, but Shelley takes a very different attitude to the problem of the glory's departure:

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
 Floats though unseen among us,—visiting  
 This various world with as inconstant wing  
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower

The splendor in Nature is due to this shadow but is not identical with it, as the shadow of an unseen Power is itself unseen even when it moves among us, fitful as the creeping summer wind. Wordsworthian natural glory is thus three degrees removed from an unknown reality. Yet it does intimate reality to us, and such reality is fleetingly manifested in any phenomenon that moves us by its grace and mystery.

The next stanza relates the evanescence of this spirit of Beauty to man's scope for negations, to his contradictory capacity "for love and hate, despondency and hope." These dualities remain inexplicable, and the attempts of superstition and religion to deal with them are vain endeavors, frail spells that cannot dismiss "doubt, chance, and mutability." Only the momentary visitations of beauty's light give grace and truth to appearances, and redeem man from his natural despair:

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart  
 And come, for some uncertain moments lent.  
 Man were immortal, and omnipotent,  
 Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
 Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.  
 Thou messenger of sympathies,

That wax and wane in lowers' eyes—  
 Thou—that to human thought art nourishment,  
 Like darkness to a dying flamel  
 Depart not as thy shadow came,  
 Depart not—lest the grave should be,  
 Like life and fear, a dark reality.

This stanza is the heart of Shelley's hymn. The Christian triad of virtues—love, hope, and faith—are replaced here by the Shelleyan triad of love, hope, and self-esteem, this last meaning esteem for the Imagination as the great agency of moral good within each of us. These virtues come and go like cloud movements, and are only lent us by the visitations of Imagination or the Intellectual Beauty. If they remained with us, we would be as gods. Human love and thought wax and wane in cycle insofar as they are alternately nourished and abandoned by the unseen Spirit, just as if first the Spirit fed the flame and then left it to die in darkness. The stanza closes in the desperation of a hopeless prayer. Doctrinal center of the poem as it is, the fourth stanza is a little strident in tone.

Until now the hymn has dealt with a general phenomenon, the arrival and departure of the spirit of Beauty. The poem's second half particularizes both the gain and the loss, and more directly recalls Wordsworth. Shelley abandons sensuous observation for memory, in the manner of the Great Ode. As a boy he actively sought ghostly revelations, and "called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed," the names presumably being those of Christian doctrine. But nothing came of this seeking. In the wise passivity of "musing deeply on the lot of life," in the spring of the year, suddenly the shadow of Beauty fell upon him with the force of a religious awakening. In response, he vowed that he would dedicate his powers to this spirit. The final stanza renews this vow, and echoes the Wordsworthian "sober coloring" of mature Imagination:

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
 When noon is past—there is a harmony  
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,  
 Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been!  
 Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
 Of nature on my passive youth



Descended, to my onward life supply  
    Its calm—to one who worships thee,  
    And every form containing thee,  
    Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind  
To fear himself, and love all human kind.

The first five lines here are thoroughly Wordsworthian; they would fit into the last stanza of the *Intimations* ode. In what follows, Shelley breaks with Wordsworth, as he has several times previously in the poem. The hidden Power descends on the poet's passive youth like the truth of nature, but in his onward life he must learn to worship the Power only, and not its ebbing natural manifestations. When the imagination becomes more active, nature loses its power as truth. We have seen this dialectic operative in Blake and Wordsworth, involuntarily in the latter case. To worship every form containing the Power is to worship Blake's human form divine, or the imagination incarnate. So drastic a humanism Wordsworth could not bring himself to accept, though he comes close to it in his visions of shepherds against the sky in *The Prelude*. Shelley bluntly declares for such a humanism here in his hymn. The final effect of the Spirit of Beauty on the young poet is to strengthen his imaginative virtues of "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem." "To fear himself" is to hold his imagination in reverence and awe as a mark of divinity; to "love all human kind" is to see them as potential imagination; and the calm he requests finds its foundation in his visionary hope. Shelley has thrown off his *alastor* or Spectre, his selfhood of despair, and has found in its place a quasi-religious impulse, the desire to make a myth out of the heart's responses to the hidden godhead whose light moves so precariously through the natural world.

### MONT BLANC

The reasons of the heart find their expression in Shelley's hymn of Beauty. The report of the head, searching out the nature of the hidden power that governs thought and the universe, is involved in the other nature ode of 1816, the irregularly rhymed *Mont Blanc*.<sup>43</sup> Here the dominant influence is *Tintern Abbey*, and the dissent from Wordsworth becomes more explicit.