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Poetic Quests and Questioning in Shelley's *Alastor* Collection

NEIL FRAISTAT

Shelley . . . is . . . interested in . . . the perpetual struggle of *becoming a poet*, and then remaining a poet, by continually becoming a poet again.

Harold Bloom

THE publication of *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude: And Other Poems* in January 1816 marked Shelley's poetic debut before the English public.¹ It is appropriate, then, that these twelve poems largely concern the problems of becoming and remaining a poet in the contemporary world. Shelley seems to have given thought to the selection and arrangement of the *Alastor* poems, even if without recourse to an elaborately preconceived plan.² Earl Wasserman, for instance, views the 1816 poems as revolving about "the theme of man's transience and nature's inconstancy. . . ." He maintains that as a group they reject life and attempt to

1. Shelley had cut out his name and address, which appear as those of the publisher, from the approximately seventy copies of *Queen Mab* that were distributed. Both *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (1810) and the *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson* (also 1810) were published anonymously. Understandably, the publication of *Alastor . . . And Other Poems* was an important milestone for him.

2. Two of the twelve—"Superstition" and "The Daemon of the World"—are revised sections of *Queen Mab*; two others—"Stanzas.—April, 1814" and the untitled lyric Mary later called "On Death"—were written considerably before their publication. An untitled early version of "On Death" is in the Esdaile Notebook. Shelley had Samuel Hamilton print 250 copies of the volume, which were ready for publication by 6 January 1816. In his haste to see the book through the press, Shelley most probably read the proofs of "Alastor" while still working on "The Daemon." The short distance between his home in Bishopsgate and Hamilton's shop in Weybridge, Surrey, not only permitted a quick exchange of MSS and proofs, but also allowed Shelley to supervise the printing of his work. Interestingly, John Murray, the first publisher to whom Shelley offered the volume, turned it down. Instead, it was published jointly by Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy of Paternoster Row, and Carpenter and Son of Old Bond Street.

find meaning in death: "Conviction that the world is incorrigibly deficient has withered Shelley's utopian zeal and redirected his aspirations to the 'secret things of the grave.'" William McTaggart, who praises the "skill and care" with which Shelley arranged the poems, has argued that the underlying pattern of ideas in the volume moves between the "failure of a poetic vision" in "Alastor" and the "triumph of a poetic ideal" in "The Daemon of the World."³ Whereas Wasserman accounts admirably for the first six poems in the volume, he apparently ignores the public aspirations evident in most of the final six. McTaggart, on the other hand, overstates the "triumph" achieved in "The Daemon," which in 1816 is a grimmer poem than either the two-part "Daemon," or the utopian *Queen Mab* from which it was originally taken.⁴ Although together Wasserman and McTaggart help to illuminate the general shape of the volume, the *Alastor* poems are more complexly interrelated in imagery and theme than either critic has shown.

Indeed, the collection is polarized by the tensions between the opening "Alastor" and the closing "Daemon." Just as the despair of the former is countered by the limited hope of the latter, the private cares and despondency so evident in the first half of the volume are subordinated to the public concerns and vitality dominating the poems in the second. Throughout the 1816 collection—particularly in "Alastor" and "The Daemon," the two longest poems—Shelley probes the limitations of human knowledge, questioning the nature of the world, the mind, and poetry itself. As a whole, the *Alastor* volume presents an episode in Shelley's perpetual struggle to create himself as a poet. Accordingly, it comes to ask a com-

3. See Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 5, 6; McTaggart, "The Design and Unity of Shelley's *Alastor* Volume," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 23 (1972), 29. Wasserman observes that Shelley was always "conscientious about the compatibility of the poems to be included in each of his collections" (p. 239). For further discussion of Shelley's penchant for fashioning coherent volumes, as well as an extensive reading of *Prometheus Unbound, With Other Poems*, see my *The Poem and the Book: Reading Romantic Volumes* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

4. In order, these are the poems of the volume: 1.) "Alastor"; 2.) "Oh! there are spirits of the air"; 3.) "Stanzas.—April, 1814"; 4.) "Mutability"; 5.) "On Death"; 6.) "A Summer-Evening Churchyard, Lechlade, Gloucestershire"; 7.) "To Wordsworth"; 8.) "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte"; 9.) "Superstition"; 10.) "Sonnet from the Italian of Dante"; 11.) "Translated from the Greek of Moschus"; 12.) "The Daemon of the World."

elling question: given the nature of the world and the mind, can a poet retain his clarity of vision without faltering before what he sees?

The *Alastor* poems portray the world as the “nurse of all we know” and “mother of all we feel” (“On Death,” lines 13, 14).⁵ The natural world thus presents the mind with an all-but-closed system, and both modern physics and philosophy tell us what Shelley already had deduced: in order to know a closed system fully, one would have to be standing outside of it. Consistently, the world the volume depicts seems to frustrate any determined search after knowledge. The “majesty of Earth” implies the existence of a force beyond Nature (“Alastor,” line 199). Yet the “varying roof of heaven / And the green earth,” resplendent with “Light, sound, and motion,” disclose to the mind only “inexplicable things” (“Alastor,” lines 96–97; “A Summer-Evening Churchyard,” line 9; “Oh! there are spirits,” line 9). “[D]eep mysteries,” including the “secret things of the grave,” are concealed by a phenomenal world that the mind experiences as a “boundless realm of unending change” (“Alastor,” line 23; “On Death,” lines 19, 24).

A poet yearning to solve the riddle of this “unfathomable world” discovers that he cannot follow Nature’s “most secret steps,” nor describe her “inmost sanctuary” (“Alastor,” lines 18, 81, 38). His problems are epistemological and linguistic. Prevented from seeing beyond the “dark gate of death” (“Alastor,” line 211), he remains uncertain about the truth of any of his observations. The more he pursues any ultimate forms of knowledge in the natural world, the more he is forced back upon himself. The closed system of the world becomes merely a larger reflection of the enclosed self.⁶

The poet’s dependence on language further complicates his predicament.

5. For “Alastor,” “Stanzas,” “Mutability,” and “To Wordsworth,” I quote from the texts in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); for “Superstition” and the original version of “The Daemon of the World” I return to the reprint of the 1816 collection edited by Bertram Dobell for the Shelley Society (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886); for the other six poems in the volume I cite *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. G. M. Matthews (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

6. John Locke had outlined this problem: “Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas . . . it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them.” See *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. C. Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894), II, 167.

In the fragment “On Life,” an essay considering many of the same problems explored in the 1816 poems, Shelley records his frustration: “These words are inefficient and metaphorical—Most words so—No help.”⁷ Language is itself a system of metaphors the mind imposes upon the world, no more suited for capturing truth than the limited mind employing it. Like thoughts, words can double back upon the mind, becoming ironic, self-reflexive markers of the mind’s inability to know or describe its world. The speed with which this can happen is demonstrated in “Alastor,” where as we shall see, the Narrator’s own metaphors reverse their original meanings at the end of the poem.

Imaginative experience in the *Alastor* volume is most often signified by encounters with ghosts, spirits, dream-figures, and daemons. Functioning at the juncture between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, these figures serve as Shelley’s version of angels, messengers to those within space and time of what lies beyond. However, they are more elusive, more evanescent than angels. One is uncertain ultimately not only of their intent, but also whether they truly have some message to relate. Unlike the angels sanctioned by Judeo-Christian mythology, Shelley’s messengers may be nothing more than delusions, phantoms produced by the anxieties of an imagination that ardently desires answers to Nature’s riddles. Contact with Shelleyan messengers can be regenerative, as shown in “The Daemon of the World.” More often, however, the questing mind tries fruitlessly—with devastating results—to force “some lone ghost / Thy [Nature’s] messenger, to render up the tale / Of what we are” (“Alastor,” lines 27–29). “Alastor” and many of the accompanying poems explore the paradox that those who are most imaginative may also be the most preyed upon by the imagination.

I

The career of the Visionary in “Alastor” illustrates the dangers of imaginative questing. His life divides into two main phases: the first, best described by the trope synecdoche, consists of the events leading up to and including his dream vision; the second, best described by the trope metonymy, is a mirror-image reversal of the first, ending with the Visionary’s death. If the

7. Reiman and Powers, p. 474n.

Visionary begins by actively seeking knowledge, hoping to forge from parts a vision of the whole, he ends in a flight deathward, during which the world is depleted of meaning for him. To understand this startling reversal, one must look at both where and when it occurs.

In his quest, the Visionary traces civilization back through ancient Greece, Jerusalem, and Babylon, arriving finally at the birthplace of humanity in the Indian Caucasus, where he reaches an impasse. Although he has drunk "deep of the fountain of knowledge," he is "still insatiate." He can neither exhaust the huge stores of information available in the natural world, nor gain any final form of knowledge. Yet his imagination is infatuated with its own strength. No merely human object can content it. Rather than abandoning its quest for "doubtful knowledge," the Visionary's imagination now couches this quest in more compelling and erotic terms: "He images to himself the Being whom he loves." Through dream the imagination provides the Visionary with an intoxicating image of its own beauty, distilled from "all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture" (Preface, p. 69). The Dream Maiden thus produced is the imagination in the act of seducing the mind, luring it to forsake all of its other—and outer—claims.

"A gradual change was here, / Yet ghastly" (lines 532–533). After his dream, the Visionary rejects "the deaf air, . . . the blind earth, and heaven / That echoes not my thoughts" (lines 289–290). In losing nature, he also loses himself as a poet. Jean Hall notes that "the capacity for imagery depends upon the mind's ability to structure fields, but this Poet's eyes and mind have become like a reflection of the moon in the ocean—they only replicate, not formulate things." The Visionary becomes the image-maker reduced to mere image: "Like Lockean man he is a mirror that accurately reflects the flow of his phenomenal experience, but has no power to construe it."⁸

Reversing the information-gathering process of the Visionary's journey to the Indian Caucasus, his voyage to the top of the Georgian Caucasus shows the mind experiencing "things-in-their-farewell."⁹ As he passes

8. Jean Hall, *The Transforming Image: A Study of Shelley's Major Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 27.

9. The phrase is from J. H. Van den Berg, "The Subject and his Landscape," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 61. Stuart Curran traces the Visionary's journey from the Indian to the Georgian Caucasus,

from the “musical woods” to the “silent nook” where he dies, the Visionary sees Nature as self-sufficient and self-enclosed, like the narcissi “whose yellow flowers / For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes, / Reflected in the crystal calm” (lines 403, 572, 406–408). Yet the impoverished world he perceives is only a reflection of his own mind, which is gradually becoming a vacuum.

The Narrator recognizes that for the Visionary to seek his love “Beyond the realms of dream” is to “[overleap] the bounds,” to search within the natural world for that which is “Lost, lost, for ever lost, / In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep” (lines 206, 207, 209–210). Death becomes the last desperate hope for such a quester: “Does the dark gate of death / Conduct to thy mysterious paradise, / O Sleep?” asks the Visionary, who willingly dies to discover the answer (lines 211–213). Frustrated by the natural world, seduced by his imagination, the Visionary demonstrates how, through radical self-reflexiveness, the imaginative quester can be reduced to a spectral shadow.

At the beginning of his poem, the Narrator of “Alastor” seems neither to have betrayed nor been betrayed by his imagination. Although Nature refuses to unveil the secrets of its “inmost sanctuary” to him, the Narrator still claims as consolation for the “burthen of the mystery” the smaller victories allowed his imagination by Nature: the serenity he gains from “incommunicable dream / And twilight phantasms, and deep noon-day thought” (lines 38, 39–40). But “incommunicable dream” can damn the mind to solipsism, “twilight phantasms” can horrify as well as delight, and “deep noon-day thought” can easily degenerate into hyperconscious despair. A tenuous balance is established here with all of the fragility and much of the complexity of Wordsworth’s early poetry.¹⁰

and comments: “Among the multiplying ironies of *Alastor*, none is more striking than that the poet traces the origin of man to Caucasus, then again on Caucasus finds his death. The confusion of two geographical entities under a name comprehending opposites is an exact counterpart to the visionary maiden of the poet’s imagination who promises perfect life and in the end grants only death.” See *Shelley’s Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1975), p. 64.

10. P. Mueschke and E. L. Griggs first developed the resemblances between the Narrator and Wordsworth in “Wordsworth as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 229–245. Earl Wasserman notes not only that the Narrator is Wordsworthian, but also that the Visionary is Shelley’s “correction” of Wordsworth’s Margaret from the first book of *The Excursion*. I am indebted throughout my consideration of “*Alastor*” to

However, unlike the more self-aware Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey," the Narrator of "Alastor" does not control fully the implications of his language. He is ignorant, for example, of the irony involved in calling himself "a long forgotten lyre" awaiting the breath of Nature for inspiration. Unable to gain actively from Nature what he seeks, he resorts instead to a passivity which presupposes both the constant benevolence and continued adequacy of Nature. The narrator of "Mutability" is wiser: though he, too, compares humanity to forgotten lyres, these are "forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings / Give various response to each varying blast" (lines 5–6). The relationship between Nature and the mind is perpetually changing; one who depends upon constancy in an inconstant world will find himself shattered like the protagonist of "Oh! there are spirits"—or the Narrator of "Alastor," who at the end of his poem perceives the dead body of the Visionary as "A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings / The breath of heaven did wander" (lines 667–668). His image of inspiration is thus transformed into a metaphor for death.¹¹

Interestingly, the Narrator also describes the Visionary's body as a "dream / Of youth, which night and time have quenched for ever" (lines 669–670). Dying with the Visionary are the Narrator's former conceptions of his world. Through the course of his poem, the Narrator becomes increasingly dislocated from the Nature he praises at its beginning. Loss enters his vocabulary: starting with a hymn, he ends with an elegy. Such, perhaps, is what Shelley comes to see as the inevitable course of all poets of Nature.

Wasserman's seminal discussion of the poem (*Shelley: A Critical Reading*, pp. 11–41). Following Wasserman's logic, one might also see the Visionary as Shelley's revision of the Solitary, who abjures "'a world / Not moving to his mind'" (*Excursion*, II.314–15), desiring only his own death. All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry are taken from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–49). For the most extensive recent treatment of the Narrator as Wordsworthian, see Yvonne M. Carothers, "Alastor: Shelley Corrects Wordsworth," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 42 (1981), 21–47. Through the Narrator, according to Carothers, "Shelley . . . allows Wordsworth to correct his own and his generation's faults"; thus, the meaning of the poem becomes the Narrator's recognition at the end "that he, not nature, is truly the subject of his song and the source of his genius" (p. 23).

11. Wasserman, who comments upon this reversal (p. 38), earlier mentions that "something horribly paradoxical happens, unintended by the Narrator, when he formulates his wish" that the Visionary had been granted eternal life in earth, like the Wandering Jew, in lines 675–681. "Unexpectedly, earthly life without end reveals itself as the solitude of 'incarnate death' [line 681], a boon, ironically from God's chalice, from which the Christian expects the eucharistic gift of spiritual immortality" (p. 37).

Addressed in "To Wordsworth" as "Poet of Nature," the Wordsworth who weeps from learning that "things depart which never may return" is similarly elegiac (line 2); and in a chilling "correction" of the Intimations Ode that replaces a flower with a corpse, a deep joy with a profound sorrow, the Narrator contemplates the Visionary's body with a "woe too 'deep for tears'" (line 713).¹² Left only with "pale despair and cold tranquility" as his poem closes (line 718), the Narrator of "Alastor," like his protagonist, comes to inhabit a world devoid of promise. Nor are their parallel fates coincidental.

Earl Wasserman's brilliant distinction between the Visionary and the Narrator helps us compare their respective plights, but may encourage us to view the former as existing independently of the Narrator. The fact is, however, that our only knowledge of the Visionary is filtered through the Narrator's consciousness, and he tells us things about the Visionary he cannot possibly "know."¹³ To this extent, the Visionary is the Narrator's fictive self-projection; his story is shaped by the latter's preoccupations, desires, and doubts.¹⁴

The Narrator projects the Visionary, who in turn projects the Dream Maiden. At each remove the imagination, frustrated by the natural world, turns further inward, fashioning increasingly more rarefied versions of itself and threatening to refine the mind out of existence. Such is the process set in motion when the poet himself becomes the only subject of his

12. William Keach argues that the four echoes in "Alastor" of the Intimations Ode—lines 2–4, 26, 196–200, 713—"are just as prominent and structurally more significant than those of *The Excursion*." See "Obstinate Questionings: The Immortality Ode and *Alastor*," *The Wordsworth Circle*, 12 (1981), 36.

13. For example, the Narrator recounts the particulars of the Visionary's death although he has himself said that this occurs in a spot where "One step, / One human step alone, has ever broken / The stillness of its solitude" (lines 588–590).

14. William Keach, who claims that "the ultimate source of the poem's reflexiveness resides with the narrator," persuasively describes "Alastor" as a "symbolic fiction in which the wandering poet, the dreams, and the landscape function as projections of the narrator's own troubled psyche." See "Reflexive Imagery in Shelley," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 24 (1975), 55. Arguing from different premises, Jean Hall comes to a similar conclusion: "If the lady has been the Poet's idealized self-image, in turn, the Poet has been the narrator's idealized self-image" (*The Transforming Image*, p. 29). See also Carothers, who claims that to treat the Narrator and Visionary as distinct personae "is to do an injustice to the poem" (p. 27). For her argument that they are aspects of the same Wordsworthian mind, representing Wordsworth's penchant for "regarding himself as 'two consciousnesses,'" see "Alastor: Shelley Corrects Wordsworth," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 42 (1981), 28–30.

poetry.¹⁵ And at its most fundamental level, "Alastor" asks whether, given the nature of the world and the mind, it is possible to write poetry that is not self-reflexive.

The concerns raised in the opening poem are pursued throughout the volume. Like the Narrator of "Alastor," the protagonist of "Oh! there are spirits of the air," the second poem, is also destroyed by the world he discovers. Not recognizing soon enough the "false earth's inconstancy" and unable to sustain himself once he has, the protagonist loses all possibilities for imaginative fulfillment: "Night's ghosts and dreams have now departed" (lines 20, 28). The epigraph to the poem, taken from Euripides' *Hippolytus*—"With tears I will endure an ill-starred fate"—contains the key to its metaphoric progression. For the protagonist loses his ability to see "gentle ghosts," whose eyes are as "fair / As star-beams among twilight trees" (lines 3–4), after he vainly pursues the "Beams" from a woman's "starry eyes," which promise more limited but immediate satisfaction (lines 14, 13). His destiny is quite literally ill-starred: no longer able to glimpse "gentle ghosts," he is left estranged from the world, with only the "ghastly presence" of his own soul become doppelgänger, "changed to a foul fiend through misery" (lines 31, 30). There is no remedy for this condition. Any subsequent movement of the mind would only endanger it further: "Be as thou art. Thy settled fate, / Dark as it is, all change would aggravate" (lines 35–36).

In contrast to the Visionary of "Alastor," who dies pursuing the "Two starry eyes" beckoning to him (line 490), the protagonist of "Oh! there are spirits" stages an aborted search for fulfillment that results in his death-in-life. The fate of each man is a function of the relative strength of his imagination. Whereas one is reminded by the starry eyes he sees of a completion that, having once been enjoyed, makes all else insufficient, the other sees only the star-like eyes of "gentle ghosts," with their distant and ambivalent promise. Ironically, the protagonist of "Oh! there are spirits" is saved from

15. If the Narrator of "Alastor" is indeed Shelley's reading of Wordsworth, particularly the Wordsworth of *The Excursion*, then Shelley precedes Keats in noting the disastrous consequences for poetry and the poet of what the latter termed "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime." William Hazlitt had made essentially the same observation in a review of *The Excursion* which appeared in the *Examiner* for 21 August 1814, 542: "An intense intellectual egotism swallows up everything. . . . The power of the mind preys upon itself. It is as if there was nothing but himself and the universe."

death because he is less compelled than the Visionary by the urgency of his own vision. He is forsaken by, as the Visionary forsakes, nature and humanity. Yet if the Visionary's refusal to be satisfied by nothing less than everything is comparatively courageous, it is also suicidal. Thus, in the two opening poems of the 1816 volume Shelley presents a frightening picture of the imagination: while it is fatal to follow its dictates, it is equally dangerous for the mind to ignore them. "The good die first," explain the lines from *The Excursion* with which Shelley ends the Preface to "Alastor," "And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust, / Burn to the socket!" (p. 70).

Significantly, the speaker of "Oh! there are spirits" thinks that the individual mind must be sufficient unto itself. He views any attempt to find satisfaction in the outer world as reflecting a failure of mental resources: "Did thine own mind afford no scope / Of love, or moving thoughts to thee?" (lines 21–22). This is striking when one recognizes that, like the speaker of "Stanzas.—April, 1814," he is in fact speaking *to and about himself*.¹⁶ Indeed, the speaker's language in "Stanzas," the succeeding poem, is almost completely self-referential. Because he is his own audience, he does not provide enough particulars for us to understand the circumstances surrounding his forced separation from his lover. His predicament, however, does seem to repeat a by now familiar pattern.

Like the protagonist of "Oh! there are spirits," who "sought in starry eyes / Beams that were never meant for thine, / Another's wealth" (lines 13–15), the forlorn lover of "Stanzas" is broken by an unrealizable love and forced back into himself: "Duty and dereliction guide thee back to solitude" (line 8). Tormented by the loss of "the music of two voices and the light of one sweet smile," his only hope for relief is in death: "But thy soul or this world must fade in the frost that binds the dead, / . . . ere thou and peace may meet" (lines 24, 15–16). Closer in its date of composition and in its melancholic tone to Shelley's early poetry than most of the other

16. Cf. Wordsworth's Solitary, who states, "I exist / Within myself, not comfortless" (III. 966–967). Although Shelley could have had Coleridge in mind in "Oh! there are spirits"—as Mary Shelley claimed—he may instead have been thinking of Wordsworth. However, most critics accept Newman Ivey White's contention that the poem arises from Shelley's own despondency over Cornelia Turner. See *Shelley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), I, 30, and, for example, Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 611n.

poems in this collection, "Stanzas" nonetheless fits thematically with the poems following "Alastor," adding yet one more despairing victim of desire to the collection.

"Mutability" proclaims what has been made apparent in the three preceding poems: "A dream has power to poison sleep" (line 9). Whatever the mind desires or cherishes will be the seeds of its own undoing. "Nought may endure but Mutability" (line 16). Knowing only that whatever is won will be lost in time, that "Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow" (line 15), the mind learns to equate perpetual change with a necessary series of losses culminating in its own death. There seems to be no compensation for these losses except, perhaps, after death. However, death offers nothing but uncertainty—which is itself the subject of "On Death" and "A Summer-Evening Churchyard," placed fifth and sixth in the *Alastor* volume.

To the speaker of "On Death," death is every bit as mysterious as his present life. He is convinced that after death "all that we know, or feel, or see, / Shall pass like an unreal mystery" (lines 17–18). But death remains "unspeaking" and veils a future state that may be no more than oblivion. The very fear that nothing lies beyond this world makes the approach of death "a fearful blow / To a brain unencompassed with nerves of steel" (lines 15–16). As the speaker acknowledges in the series of four questions concluding "On Death," those within the natural world confront the irony that their most urgent questions cannot be answered.

"A Summer-Evening Churchyard" is Shelley's attempt in the volume to make peace with death, to envision death as fulfilling all desires. Within the calm summer twilight of the churchyard, death is "solemnized and softened" (line 25), seemingly "mild / And terrorless as this serenest night" (lines 25–26). Here is the climax of the self-destructive impulses gathering force throughout the first six poems of the volume. Presaged by the consolation offered the desolated lover in "Stanzas"—"Whatever moves, or toils, or grieves, hath its appointed sleep" (line 20)—as well as the many associations between sleep and death in the preceding poems, the ending of "A Summer-Evening Churchyard" pictures death as a "breathless sleep" over which the "loveliest dreams perpetual watch did keep" (lines 29–30). For a moment the Visionary's most pressing question is answered affirmatively; death is seen as leading to the "mysterious paradise of sleep."

II

In the Preface to "Alastor" Shelley condemns all "those who attempt to exist without human sympathy" (p. 70), sanctioning active involvement in the world as the only possible successful course of action. "Social enjoyment in one form or another is the alpha & omega of existence," he wrote to Peacock.¹⁷ Rather than accepting the world as "incurably deficient" and moving deathward—as Wasserman claims—Shelley turns in the second half of the volume back toward life. Here, he assumes a public stance from which he speaks out against Wordsworth, a fallen poet, in "To Wordsworth"; against Napoleon, a "fallen tyrant" (line 1), and the tyranny of the Quadruple Alliance in "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte"; and against the fallen mind of man for accepting its own enslavement in "Superstition."

Both "To Wordsworth" and "Feelings of a Republican" are sonnets structured by important reversals. In the former, which will be discussed more extensively in section III below, Shelley's inversion of the customary order of octave and sestet suggests Wordsworth's inversion of his own early values. In the latter, Shelley's shift to Shakespearean form after an initial Petrarchan quatrain defeats the reader's expectations just as Napoleon's career constantly defied the expectations of Republicans: his rise as a tyrant destroyed the hopes aroused by the French Revolution, and his fall—which ought to have been cause for rejoicing—issued only in the worse tyranny of the Quadruple Alliance. Identified in "To Wordsworth" as the authentic voice of "truth and liberty" (line 12), poetry must combat those orthodox political and religious forces that are discovered, in "Feelings of a Republican," to hold sway over contemporary Europe: "old Custom, legal Crime, / And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time" (lines 13–14).

Shelley's critique of orthodoxy throughout the 1816 volume is grounded philosophically as well as politically. In a world that defies comprehension, any type of absolutism is likely not only to be misguided, but also enslaving; to embrace an orthodox creed, the mind must sacrifice its own liberty. If political orthodoxy in the contemporary world fosters tyranny, meta-

17. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), II, 114.

physical orthodoxies uphold stultifying forms of absolutism—what Shelley calls in the next poem of the volume “superstitions.”

“Superstition” appeared originally as a part of *Queen Mab* (vi, 72–102), where it thematically resembles Blake’s discussion in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* of how man came to forget that “All deities reside in the human breast.” As defined in both *Queen Mab* and *Alastor . . . And Other Poems*, superstition arises when the mind, “Baffled” by the world (line 23), creates an image or a theory to which it first abdicates all power and which it then worships. In *Queen Mab* these lines specifically trace the historical rise of religion from its innocent pantheistic infancy and adolescence to its bloody emergence in adulthood as institutionalized Christianity. Religion thus begins long ago with the feeling that “All living things . . . / Were Gods” (vi.77–78). Eventually, though, the mind is frustrated by its own ignorance, and refines its limited knowledge into an “abstract point” to which it bends “and call[s] . . . God!” (vi.101–102).

Recast as a separate poem in the 1816 collection, these lines gain an added frame of reference, which Shelley emphasized by broadening the final line—“Converging, thou didst bend, and called it God!”—into two lines—“Converging, thou didst give it name, and form, / Intelligence, and unity, and power.” Within the context of the volume, “Superstition” becomes an anatomy of how the imaginative mind can destroy itself by willingly forsaking its liberty for an image of its own creation, or for a stabilizing but self-deceived faith.

The Visionary of “Alastor,” for instance, is “Duped” by an “illustrious superstition” when he pursues to an “untimely grave” a product of his imagination (Preface, p. 69). In the words of “Superstition,” he fatally confers upon the Dream Maiden “name, and form, / Intelligence, and unity, and power.” However, there are superstitions far less “illustrious” to which one can succumb. All those buffeted by the world they begin by worshipping, who shift their allegiance to the “abstract point” orthodoxy defines as God, estrange themselves from true imaginative power and liberty. Indeed, as a group, “To Wordsworth,” “Feelings of a Republican,” and “Superstition” show how the imagination’s lapse into orthodoxy leads to dearth in poetry, politics, and metaphysics.

Following these three condemnations of failed imagination are two poems written in a gentler mood, stressing the regenerative power of the

imagination and poetry. "Sonnet from the Italian of Dante" and "Translated from the Greek of Moschus" both confront the problems caused by mutability with which so many of the 1816 poems are concerned. First, as translations from Dante and Moschus, they assert the power of poetry to reach across time and cultures, producing works of imaginative vitality sufficient to withstand mutability. Though man is mortal, the best products of his mind are not. Thus, in the power of poetry to defy change there is hope. Moreover, if the "Dante" sonnet speaks of a "strict community" (line 8) possible among human hearts, the "Moschus" sonnet concerns a possible reconciliation between man's "unquiet mind" (line 4) and a constantly changing natural world. Nature, death, and other people, then, are not necessarily antithetical to human happiness; the imagination may have the means to accommodate them all.

The "magic ship" wished for by Dante, "whose charmed sails should fly / With winds at will where'er our thoughts might wend" (lines 3-4), recalls the boat in "Alastor" magically guided by the Visionary's desire.¹⁸ However, the imaginative voyage upon which Dante would set sail, accompanied by those he most loves, depends upon the redemptive powers of the imagination, the ways in which it fosters, not destroys the mind. Likewise, "The Daemon of the World" concludes the volume by granting its protagonist Ianthe a benevolent dream vision of process leading to harmony, a vision of the "truths which wisest poets see / Dimly . . ." (lines 85-86).

The *Alastor* volume opens and closes with poems in which a dream is centrally important. Spanning the polarities of imaginative experience, it begins with a dream that forever alienates a poet from his world and ends with a dream intended to reintegrate a poet with hers. Throughout the volume Shelley explores the tensions between the destructive and creative impulses of the imagination, gradually discovering that the poet himself

18. In fact, Shelley, not Dante, calls it a "magic ship." Timothy Webb comments that "these lines of Dante fit very comfortably into the patterns of Shelley's own preoccupations. The idea of the voyage in the small boat to some Elysian haven constantly presented itself to Shelley's mind, both as man and as poet; magic ships characteristically float down the rivers and across the seas of his imagination." Though Webb does not mention the context of the sonnet in the 1816 collection, he does claim it as "one of the shaping factors of *Epipsy-chidion*, with its climactic *invitation au voyage*." See *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 281.

must be the battleground for the perpetual war between the visionary imagination and its opposite. To one with such knowledge, "Death and his brother Sleep" are both "wonderful" ("The Daemon," lines 1–2); the mind must continually fight against the first to gain the insights of the other.

Fittingly, then, "The Daemon" begins by casting Ianthe on nebulous ground between these two "brothers": over the course of six long questions running to twenty-one lines, Shelley purposely refuses to reveal whether she is dead or asleep. When ready to resolve this confusion, he uses the line break to mislead the reader into temporarily thinking that Ianthe is dead: "Ianthe doth not sleep / The dreamless sleep of death" (lines 31–32). For Ianthe is to be a heroine reclaimed from a world of death in order to help convert it to life. As her name implies, she is a bud prepared to burst into bloom, the potentiality of the human spirit to realize fully its humanity.

The Daemon visits her because Ianthe's "heart is free" from "hate and awe," because she is ruled neither by selfish desires nor the superstitions such desires inevitably propagate (line 91). Like the star that once was Wordsworth ("To Wordsworth," line 7), Ianthe illuminates and comforts a darkened and distressed world, burning "For dark and cold mortality / A living light, to cheer it long" (lines 94–95). The "mighty boon" she consequently earns is what so many other protagonists in the collection have longed for. Her voyage to the Daemon's temple allows Ianthe a view of the world of space and time from a perspective located at the center and circumference of space and time, "in the midst of all existing things" (line 207).

Led by the Daemon, Ianthe's journey up and outward is simultaneously a movement inward, to the depths of the mind. The Daemon of the World, the "world's supremest spirit" (line 78), represents a mental faculty much like Jung's "collective unconscious": she tells Ianthe that she knows "all thy memory doth inherit / From ruin of divinest things" (lines 80–81). She is also a muse. Her temple, reared from the mind's best impulses, contains "The elements of all that human thought / Can frame of lovely or sublime" (lines 217–18). This is a realm of pure inspiration that can be reached only in that pulsation of an artery during which Blake maintained that the poet's work is done. "[T]here is a moment," says Shelley, "When

the sun's highest point / Peers like a star o'er ocean's western edge . . . / Then has thy rapt imagination soared . . . / [to] The temple of the mightiest Daemon" (lines 201–03, 206, 208).¹⁹

Inspiration is a state in which the mind is "Entranced in some diviner mood / Of self-oblivious solitude" (lines 88–89). Here, for the first time, the imagination is shown completely conquering its self-reflexive tendencies. Ianthe's trip by chariot to the Daemon's temple is the act of the mind tapping its most vital resources. Indeed, at the Daemon's summons, there arises from Ianthe's sleeping form a Shelleyan equivalent to Blake's "human form divine"—"a radiant spirit . . . / Robed in its human hues" (lines 109, 111). Yet Ianthe's is not a wholly triumphant ascent. Her moment of vision is as troubling as it is satisfying. Unlike *Queen Mab* or the two-part "Daemon," both of which ultimately celebrate the future apotheosis of humanity, when earth shall become the "reality of Heaven" ("The Daemon," II.1), the 1816 version focuses on the horrors of the human past and present.²⁰

Ianthe's Pisgah-like vision from an "isolated pinnacle," contrasts the cosmic "wilderness of harmony" surrounding her with the chaotic state of humanity (lines 287, 249). The radically condensed view of history she receives, with its grotesque rendering of bloody priests and bloodier kings, may read like a parody of the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, but it quite seriously presents the human mind as repeatedly self-victimized by "The sanguine codes of venerable crime" (line 269).²¹ Now a "multitudinous throng" abjectly following King and Church, humanity is last pictured in the poem as "Breathing in self-contempt fierce blasphemies / Against the Daemon of the World" (lines 277, 283–84).

19. Shelley substituted "rapt imagination" for the original "fancy" in *Queen Mab* (VI. 619), thereby distinguishing the faculty necessary to move one to the Daemon's temple. This is also in line with his transformation of *Queen Mab* into the more substantial figure of the Daemon.

20. As published in 1816, it must be emphasized, "The Daemon" consists of only part one of the two-part poem that, beginning with Forman in 1876, is found under this title in most collected editions.

21. Shelley wrote this thirty-three line passage specifically for "The Daemon of the World." In the early stages of transforming *Queen Mab* into "The Daemon" he had not planned on describing what Ianthe saw, writing instead, "None dare relate what fearful mysteries / The Spirit saw." See *Shelley and his Circle: 1773–1822*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), IV, 505. Keats's Apollo receives a similarly terse—if less macabre—view of history at the end of *Hyperion*.

However, the poem ends by endeavoring to balance the present dismaying condition of humanity with the larger perspective Ianthe wins at the Daemon's temple. What appears merely anarchic to those trapped within time is, in fact, guided by universal forces: the "unbounded universe / Above, and all around" is ruled by "Necessity's unchanging harmony" (lines 289–90, 291). Yet the poem makes no attempt to define Necessity or its operations. If, for society, Necessity implies the evolution of humanity toward greater liberty and enlightenment, there is little evidence of such movement in the past and present Ianthe sees. Nor is there much solace for one who learns that mutability itself is subject to a greater power. As invoked here, Necessity does not explain the fate of the individual mind in life or after death. The imperative questions of "On Death" all remain unanswered.²²

Perhaps the greater hope offered by "The Daemon of the World" is in Ianthe herself, the avatar of the poetic mind directed outward selflessly. Her moment of inspiration, figured as a trip to the Daemon's temple, brings Ianthe to poetic maturity. She ends with a clarified sense of the forces sustaining and opposing the poet's fight for liberation. In effect, Ianthe learns of her mission. Yeats observes that "life . . . [is] a struggle with the Daimon who would ever set us to the hardest work among those [*sic*] not impossible." The Daemon of the World seems to have set Ianthe the most difficult of all tasks—freeing the human mind. And while the poem does not necessarily predict that struggle will be won, it at least forecasts that one will be waged.²³

While the Visionary of "Alastor" and Ianthe both assimilate the history of human civilization, their knowledge conducts to far different ends. The

22. Stuart Sperry cautions that—*Queen Mab* aside—Shelley's view of Necessity cannot be equated with "the belief in a universal alteration for the better." Indeed, by the summer of 1816, says Sperry, Shelley was thinking of Necessity "as an at best indifferent and inscrutable force." See "Necessity and the Role of the Hero in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 247.

23. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, rpt. *Mythologies* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 336. In Part 2, Ianthe is given a more explicit charge by the Daemon:

. . . return
 Surpassing Spirit, to that world, where thou
 Art destined an eternal war to wage
 With tyranny and falsehood, and uproar
 The germs of misery from the human heart (II, 572–576).

Visionary embodies the Faustian impulses of the poetic mind; Ianthe, the Promethean. One's self-centered quest leads to self-destruction, the other's socially centered quest leads to an uncertain future, perhaps to self-sacrifice. Shelley concludes the *Alastor* volume, then, with the faith that the imagination can remake the world into a paradise and the hope that the human mind and heart possess the necessary resources to endure loss. However, the volume as a whole displays a wariness of all panaceas for human suffering, as well as a chastened awareness of the pitfalls within the poet's world and his own psyche that may defeat him. Shelley saw all too clearly that one who would profess how the earth can be made paradise risks becoming his own hell.

III

It is fitting that a collection so concerned with the plight of the contemporary poet should have at its center "To Wordsworth." Based upon a sonnet written by Guido Cavalcanti and addressed to Dante, which Shelley translated in 1815, "To Wordsworth" is Shelley's first public admonition to a fellow poet. Conditioning the argument of this sonnet is the logic made explicit in its final pun. No longer a poet of "truth and liberty," Wordsworth leaves Shelley to "grieve, / Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be" (lines 12, 13-14). For a poet to "be," he must serve the cause of "truth and liberty." "Deserting these" (line 13), Wordsworth, once "having been," now quite literally ceases to "be," according to Shelley.

Mary Shelley once observed that "No man ever admired Wordsworth's poetry more . . . [than Shelley]—he read it perpetually. . . ." ²⁴ It must have struck Shelley forcibly that the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth's grandest statement about the paradisaic aspirations of his poetry, was published with *The Excursion*. For in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth seemed to be retreating from the very claims made in the Prospectus toward the securer ground of religious and political orthodoxy. "Shelley . . . brings home Wordsworth's *Excursion*, of which we read a part, much disappointed," Mary records in her journal. "He is a slave." ²⁵

In the opening books of *The Excursion* Wordsworth searches almost

24. See her note to "Peter Bell the Third," in Hutchinson, p. 362.

25. *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1947), p. 15.

relentlessly for an appropriate response to death, mutability, and suffering. He voices the most urgent of contemporary concerns through the figure of the Solitary: "Oppressed by sense / Of instability, revolt, decay, / And change, and emptiness" (III.137–39), the Solitary is left despondent by the personal loss of his children and wife, followed by the calamitous failure of the French Revolution. However, by the end of the poem, the Solitary's doubts and questions give way to the Christian homilies of the Pastor and, as Stuart Sperry notes, "the real issues [are] lost sight of amid the platitudes and paraphernalia of a Sunday picnic outing."²⁶

Wordsworth was too honest a poet to falsify the troubling world he perceived. But Shelley may have thought him frightened enough by that world to endorse—albeit uneasily—his Wanderer's faith that "One adequate support / For the calamities of mortal life / Exists—one only": an "assured belief" that no matter how "sad or disturbed," one's fate is ordered by an infinitely benevolent and powerful Being "Whose everlasting purposes embrace / All accidents, converting them to good" (IV. 10–12, 14, 16–17). Perhaps Shelley's reaction to *The Excursion*, as recorded in "To Wordsworth," stemmed as much from a conviction that Wordsworth was begging important questions as from personal disappointment that the greatest poet of the age seemed to be relinquishing his earlier beliefs.

Ironically, then, "To Wordsworth" centers around a metaphor Wordsworth provides in the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, where he had hoped that his "song / With star-like virtue in its place may shine; / Shedding benignant influence . . ." (lines 88–90). Hence Shelley's poem mourns the loss of a poet who, though he had once as a "lone star" (line 7) brought light to a dark world, later fell from the firmament.²⁷ In effect, Shelley deplores the loss of a fellow mourner. For Wordsworth's early poetry had recorded and mourned the losses to which humanity is subject: "thou hast wept to know / That things depart which never may return: / Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow" (lines 1–3). Implicit in this poetic act of mourning is attempted healing and renewal. Wordsworth's seeming

26. Keats *The Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 173. I have found helpful Sperry's entire analysis of *The Excursion*, pp. 165–179.

27. Shelley may also be recalling Wordsworth's description of Milton as a "Star . . . apart" in "London: 1802" (line 9).

inability to endure loss without forsaking both “truth and liberty” leads to an even greater loss—his poetic suicide—which Shelley tells Wordsworth, “thou too feel’st, yet I alone deplore” (line 6).

The position of “To Wordsworth” at the center of the 1816 volume as well as allusions to him in “Alastor” invite speculation on the extent to which Wordsworth, in general, and *The Excursion*, in particular, are abiding contexts throughout the collection.²⁸ Indeed, it is tempting to read the first half of it as a not unsympathetic, though disquieting, meditation on the Solitary’s most significant objection to imaginative questing: “what avails imagination high / Or question deep” when as far as the “soul can go / Through time or space” it can nowhere find “a better sanctuary / From doubt and sorrow, than the senseless grave?” (III.209–10, 215–16, 223–24). “The Daemon of the World” addresses the same question from a more hopeful if sober perspective.

Similarly, although no one has yet suggested why Shelley recast “Superstition” from *Queen Mab* as a separate poem in 1816, perhaps Book Four of *The Excursion* provided his motivation. There, the Wanderer not only supplies his own version of the rise of religion, but also advocates superstition as a defense against loss and meaninglessness. After stating that he daily loses “what I desire to keep” (IV.612), the Wanderer says: “Yet rather would I instantly decline / To the traditionary sympathies / Of a most rustic ignorance . . . / To this would rather bend than see and hear / The repetitions wearisome of sense” (IV.613–15, 619–20). To all those “unreligious,” who find themselves nursing “the dreadful appetite of death,” the Wanderer advises enrollment “in the many-chambered school / Where superstition weaves her airy dream” (IV.607, 609–10). Regardless of Shelley’s actual motivation for printing it, “Superstition” does in fact refute the Wanderer’s position.

IV

“No man ever admired Wordsworth’s poetry more. . . .” Although, for Shelley, Wordsworth had ceased “to be,” he had left a legacy as compelling as it was puzzling. Shelley had gone to school on such poems as

28. Carothers likewise believes that “Alastor” and the affiliated minor poems reflect Shelley’s response to *The Excursion*: “Alastor: Shelley Corrects Wordsworth,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 42 (1981), 22.

"Tintern Abbey" and the Intimations Ode, and learned that to follow Wordsworth's early path without falling either into the despondent solipsism characterizing the Solitary or the close-minded orthodoxy practiced by the Wanderer, one must walk the narrowest of tightropes, struggling for balance the entire way. His *Alastor* collection is itself an elaborate balancing act, counterpoising the first six poems against the final six. Together, they portray the dialectical tendencies of a mind fighting for its equilibrium, where private cares clash with public responsibilities, solipsism contends with self-sacrifice, and despair vies with hope.²⁹

With the assurance characteristic of his adolescence, Shelley had prefaced *Queen Mab* with an epigraph taken from Archimedes: "Give me somewhere to stand and I will move the earth." In *Alastor . . . And Other Poems* he is still trying to locate the ground upon which he can stand, laboring to become and remain a poet by continually becoming a poet again. In the process, the largest questions he asks about the mind's relationship to the world receive no decisive answers. Perhaps Shelley here accepts that the ultimate challenge this "Baffling" world puts to poetry and the poet lies, not in providing answers for seemingly unanswerable questions—which, after all, is the prerogative of orthodoxy—but rather in the arduous task of articulating and clarifying the questions that must be asked. Only in this way can poetry remain living and liberating. Some three years after publishing the *Alastor* collection, Shelley writes in "On Life": "How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves." And yet, he concludes resolutely, "this is much."³⁰

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29. In *Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Twayne, 1969), Donald Reiman concludes that the *Alastor* collection marks Shelley's maturation as a poet and a thinker: "The volume as a whole shows Shelley stabilizing his views on man's nature and destiny and, at the same time, broadening and deepening his intellectual and esthetic foundations" (p. 41).

30. Reiman and Powers, pp. 475–476.