

You want me to undertake a great Poem—I have not the inclination nor the power. As I grow older, the indifference—*not* to life, for we love it by instinct—but to the stimuli of life, increases. Besides, this late failure of the Italians has latterly disappointed me for many reasons,—some public, some personal. My respects to Mrs. S.

Yours ever,
B

P.S.—Could not you and I contrive to meet this summer? Could not you take a run *alone*?

the *Life and Writings of Pope*, had just appeared in London. His best-known comment on Keats, written a year and a half later, is canto 11, stanza 60 in *Don Juan*, beginning "John Keats, who was killed off by one critique" and ending " 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself

be snuffed out by an Article."
7. A planned uprising by the Carbonari, a secret revolutionary society into which Byron had been initiated by the father and brother of his mistress Teresa Guiccioli, failed in Feb. 1821.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY 1792-1822

Percy Bysshe Shelley, radical in every aspect of his life and thought, emerged from a solidly conservative background. His ancestors had been Sussex aristocrats since early in the seventeenth century; his grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, made himself the richest man in Horsham, Sussex; his father, Timothy Shelley, was a hardheaded and conventional member of Parliament. Percy Shelley was in line for a baronetcy and, as befitted his station, was sent to be educated at Eton and Oxford. As a youth he was slight of build, eccentric in manner, and unskilled in sports or fighting and, as a consequence, was mercilessly bullied by older and stronger boys. He later said that he saw the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representative of man's general inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression. As he described the experience in the Dedication to *Laon and Cythna*:

So without shame, I spake:—"I will be wise,
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies
Such power, for I grow weary to behold
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise
Without reproach or check." I then controuled
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

At Oxford in the autumn of 1810, Shelley's closest friend was Thomas Jefferson Hogg, a self-centered, self-confident young man who shared Shelley's love of philosophy and scorn of orthodoxy. The two collaborated on a pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*, which claimed that God's existence cannot be proved on empirical grounds, and, provocatively, they mailed it to the bishops and heads of the colleges at Oxford. Shelley refused to repudiate the document and, to his shock and grief, was peremptorily expelled, terminating a university career that had lasted only six months. This event opened a breach between Shelley and his father that widened over the years.

Shelley went to London, where he took up the cause of Harriet Westbrook, the pretty and warmhearted daughter of a well-to-do tavern keeper, whose father, Shelley

wrote to Hogg, "has persecuted her in a most horrible way by endeavoring to compel her to go to school." Harriet threw herself on Shelley's protection, and "gratitude and admiration," he wrote, "all demand that I shall love her *forever*." He eloped with Harriet to Edinburgh and married her, against his conviction that marriage was a tyrannical and degrading social institution. He was then eighteen years of age; his bride, sixteen. The couple moved restlessly from place to place, living on a small allowance granted reluctantly by their families. In February 1812, accompanied by Harriet's sister Eliza, they traveled to Dublin to distribute Shelley's *Address to the Irish People* and otherwise take part in the movement for Catholic emancipation and for the amelioration of that oppressed and poverty-stricken people.

Back in London, Shelley became a disciple of the radical social philosopher William Godwin, author of the *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice*. In 1813 he printed privately his first important work, *Queen Mab*, a long poem set in the fantastic frame of the journey of a disembodied soul through space, to whom the fairy Mab reveals in visions the woeful past, the dreadful present, and a Utopian future. Announcing that "there is no God!" Mab decries institutional religion and codified morality as the roots of social evil, prophesying that all institutions will wither away and humanity will return to its natural condition of goodness and felicity.

In the following spring Shelley, who had drifted apart from Harriet, fell in love with the beautiful Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Convinced that cohabitation without love is immoral, he abandoned Harriet, fled to France with Mary (taking along her stepsister, Claire Clairmont), and—in accordance with his belief in nonexclusive love—invited Harriet to come live with them in the relationship of a sister. Shelley's elopement with Mary outraged her father, despite the facts that his own views of marriage had been no less radical than Shelley's and that Shelley, himself in financial difficulties, had earlier taken over Godwin's very substantial debts. When he returned to London, Shelley found that the general public, his family, and most of his friends regarded him as not only an atheist and a revolutionary but also a gross immoralist. When two years later Harriet, pregnant by an unknown lover, drowned herself in a fit of despair, the courts denied Shelley the custody of their two children. (His first child with Mary Godwin, a girl born prematurely, had died earlier, only twelve days after her birth in February 1815.) Percy and Mary married in December 1816, and in spring 1818 they moved to Italy. Thereafter he envisioned himself as an alien and outcast, rejected by the human race to whose welfare he had dedicated his powers and his life.

In Italy he resumed his restless way of life, evading the people to whom he owed money by moving from town to town and house to house. His health was usually bad. Although the death of his grandfather in 1815 had provided a substantial income, he dissipated so much of it by his warmhearted but imprudent support of William Godwin, Leigh Hunt, and other needy acquaintances that he was constantly short of funds. Within nine months, in 1818-19, both Clara and William, the children Mary had borne in 1815 and 1817, died. Grief over these deaths destroyed the earlier harmony of the Shelleys' marriage; the birth in November 1819 of another son, Percy Florence (their only child to survive to adulthood), was not enough to mend the rift.

In these circumstances, close to despair and knowing that he almost entirely lacked an audience, Shelley wrote his greatest works. In 1819 he completed *Prometheus Unbound* and a tragedy, *The Cenci*. He wrote also numerous lyric poems; a visionary call for a proletarian revolution, "The Mask of Anarchy"; a witty satire on Wordsworth, *Peter Bell the Third*; and a penetrating political essay, "A Philosophical View of Reform." His works of the next two years include "A Defence of Poetry"; *Epipsychidion*, a rhapsodic vision of love as a spiritual union beyond earthly limits; *Adonais*, his elegy on the death of Keats; and *Hellas*, a lyrical drama evoked by the Greek war for liberation from the Turks. These writings, unlike the early *Queen Mab*, are the products of a mind chastened by tragic experience, deepened by philosophical speculation, and stored with the harvest of his reading—which Shelley carried on, as his friend

Hogg said, "in season and out of season, at table, in bed, and especially during a walk," until he became one of the most erudite of poets. His delight in scientific discoveries and speculations continued, but his earlier zest for Gothic terrors and the social theories of the radical eighteenth-century optimists gave way to an absorption in Greek tragedy, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the Bible. Although he did not give up his hopes for a millennial future (he wore a ring with the motto *Il buon tempo verra*—"the good time will come"), he now attributed the evils of society to humanity's own moral failures and grounded the possibility of radical social reform on a reform of the moral and imaginative faculties through the redeeming power of love. Though often represented as a simpleminded doctrinaire, Shelley in fact possessed a complex and energetically inquisitive intelligence that never halted at a fixed mental position; his writings reflect stages in a ceaseless exploration.

The poems of Shelley's maturity also show the influence of his study of Plato and the Neoplatonists. Shelley found congenial the Platonic division of the cosmos into two worlds—the ordinary world of change, mortality, evil, and suffering and an ideal world of perfect and eternal Forms, of which the world of sense experience is only a distant and illusory reflection. The earlier interpretations of Shelley as a downright Platonic idealist, however, have been drastically modified by modern investigations of his reading and writings. He was a close student of British empiricist philosophy, which limits knowledge to valid reasoning on what is given in sense experience, and within this tradition he felt a special affinity to the radical skepticism of David Hume. A number of Shelley's works, such as "Mont Blanc," express his view of the narrow limits of what human beings can know with certainty and exemplify his refusal to let his hopes harden into a philosophical or religious creed. To what has been called the "skeptical idealism" of the mature Shelley, hope in a redemption from present social ills is not an intellectual certainty but a moral obligation. Despair is self-fulfilling; we must continue to hope because, by keeping open the possibility of a better future, hope releases the imaginative and creative powers that are the only means of achieving that end.

When in 1820 the Shelleys settled finally at Pisa, he came closer to finding contentment than at any other time in his adult life. A group of friends, Shelley's "Pisan Circle," gathered around them, including for a while Lord Byron and the swashbuckling young Cornishman Edward Trelawny. Chief in Shelley's affections were Edward Williams, a retired lieutenant of a cavalry regiment serving in India, and his charming common-law wife, Jane, with whom Shelley became infatuated and to whom he addressed some of his best lyrics and verse letters. The end came suddenly, and in a way prefigured uncannily in the last stanza of *Adonais*, in which he had described his spirit as a ship driven by a violent storm out into the dark unknown. On July 8, 1822, Shelley and Edward Williams were sailing their open boat, the *Don Juan*, on the Gulf of Spezia. A violent squall swamped the boat. When several days later the bodies were washed ashore, they were cremated, and Shelley's ashes were buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, near the graves of John Keats and William Shelley, the poet's young son.

Both Shelley's character and his poetry have been the subject of violently contradictory, and often partisan, estimates. His actions according to his deep convictions often led to disastrous consequences for himself and those near to him; and even recent scholars, while repudiating the vicious attacks by Shelley's contemporaries, attribute some of those actions to a self-assured egotism that masked itself as idealism. Yet Byron, who knew Shelley intimately and did not pay moral compliments lightly, wrote to his publisher John Murray, in response to attacks on Shelley at the time of his death: "You are all brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the *best* and least selfish man I ever knew." Shelley's politics, vilified during his lifetime, made him a literary hero to later political radicals: the Chartists in the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels at the end, and for much of the twentieth century, many of the guiding lights of the British Labour Party. As a poet Shelley was

greatly admired by Robert Browning, Swinburne, and other Victorians; but in the mid-twentieth century he was repeatedly charged with intellectual and emotional immaturity, shoddy workmanship, and incoherent imagery by influential writers such as F. R. Leavis and his followers in Britain and the New Critics in America. More recently, however, many sympathetic studies have revealed the coherent intellectual understructure of his poems and have confirmed Wordsworth's early recognition that "Shelley is one of the best *artists* of Us all: I mean in workmanship of style." Shelley, it has become clear, greatly expanded the metrical and stanzaic resources of English versification. His poems exhibit a broad range of voices, from the high but ordered passion of "Ode to the West Wind," through the heroic dignity of the utterances of Prometheus, to the approximation of what is inexpressible in the description of Asia's transfiguration and in the visionary conclusion of *Adonais*. Most surprising, for a poet who almost entirely lacked an audience, is the urbanity, the assured command of the tone and language of a cultivated man of the world, exemplified in passages that Shelley wrote all through his mature career and especially in the lyrics and verse letters that he composed during the last year of his life.

The texts printed here are those prepared by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat for *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, a Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (2001); Reiman has also edited for this anthology a few poems not included in that edition.

Mutability

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

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

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

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

ca. 1814-15

1816

To Wordsworth¹

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

1. Shelley's grieved comment on the poet of nature and of social radicalism after his views had become conservative.

Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
5 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark^o in winter's midnight roar: *small ship*
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
10 Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,²—
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

ca. 1814-15

1816

Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude Shelley wrote *Alastor* in the fall and early winter of 1815 and published it in March 1816. According to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, the poet was "at a loss for a title, and I proposed that which he adopted: *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*. The Greek word *Alastor* is an evil genius. . . . I mention the true meaning of the word because many have supposed *Alastor* to be the name of the hero" [*Memoirs of Shelley*]. Peacock's definition of an *alastor* as "an evil genius" has compounded the problems in interpreting this work: the term *evil* does not seem to fit the attitude expressed within the poem toward the protagonist's solitary quest, the poem seems to clash with statements in Shelley's preface, and the first and second paragraphs of the preface seem inconsistent with each other. These problems, however, may be largely resolved if we recognize that, in this early achievement (he was only twenty-three when he wrote *Alastor*), Shelley established his characteristic procedure of working with multiple perspectives. Both preface and poem explore alternative and conflicting possibilities in what Shelley calls "doubtful knowledge"—matters that are humanly essential but in which no certainty is humanly possible.

By the term *allegorical* in the opening sentence of his preface, Shelley seems to mean that his poem, like medieval and Renaissance allegories such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, represents an aspiration in the spiritual realm by the allegorical vehicle of a journey and quest in the material world. As Shelley's first paragraph outlines, the poem's protagonist, for whom objects in the natural world "cease to suffice," commits himself to the search for a female Other who will fulfill his intellectual, imaginative, and sensuous needs. The second paragraph of the preface, by contrast, passes judgment on the visionary protagonist in terms of the values of "actual men"—that is, the requirements of human and social life in this world. From this point of view, the visionary has been "avenged" (punished) for turning away from community in pursuit of his individual psychic needs. The diversity of attitudes expressed within the poem becomes easier to understand if, on the basis of the many echoes of Wordsworth in the opening invocation, we identify the narrator of the story as a Wordsworthian poet for whom the natural world is sufficient to satisfy both the demands of his imagination and his need for community. This narrative poet, it can be assumed, undertakes to tell compassionately, but from his own perspective, the history of a nameless visionary who has surrendered everything in the quest for a goal beyond possibility.

In this early poem Shelley establishes a form, a conceptual frame, and the imagery

2. Perhaps an allusion to "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty," the title that Wordsworth gave to the section of sonnets such as "London, 1802" when he republished them in his *Poems* of 1807.

for the Romantic quest that he reiterated in his later poems and that also served as a paradigm for many other poems, from Byron's *Manfred* and Keats's *Endymion* to the quest poems of Shelley's later admirer William Butler Yeats.

Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude

Preface

The poem entitled "ALASTOR," may be considered as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind. It represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate. The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted. So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image.¹ He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.

The picture is not barren of instruction to actual men. The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin. But that Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences, dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meaner spirits that dare to abjure its dominion. Their destiny is more abject and inglorious as their delinquency is more contemptible and pernicious. They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country. Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their

1. Shelley's view that the object of love is an idealized projection of all that is best within the self is clarified by a passage in his "Essay on Love," which may have been written at about the time of *Alastor*: "We dimly see within our intellectual nature . . . the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as

belonging to the nature of men. . . . [This is] a soul within our soul. . . . The discovery of its anti-type . . . in such proportion as the type within demands; this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and . . . without the possession of which there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules."

search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave.

"The good die first,
And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust,
Burn to the socket!"²

December 14, 1815

Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude

*Nondwn amabam, et amare amabam, qaeurebam quid amarem,
amans amare.—Confess. St. August.³*

Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!
If our great Mother⁴ has imbued my soul
With aught of natural piety¹ to feel
Your love, and recompense the boon⁵ with mine;⁶ *gift*
5 If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,⁹ *evening*
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,⁷
And solemn midnight's tingling silentness;
If autumn's hollow sighs in the sere wood,
And winter robing with pure snow and crowns
10 Of starry ice the grey grass and bare boughs;
If spring's voluptuous pantings when she breathes
Her first sweet kisses, have been dear to me;
If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast
I consciously have injured, but still loved
is And cherished these my kindred; then forgive
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw
No portion of your wonted⁸ favour now! *customary*

Mother of this unfathomable world!
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved
20 Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
And my heart ever gazes on the depth
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
25 Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings⁸
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,

2. Wordsworth's *The Excursion* 1.519–21; the passage occurs also in *The Ruined Cottage* 96–98, which Wordsworth reworked into the first book of *The Excursion* (1814).

3. St. Augustine's *Confessions* 3.1: "Not yet did I love, though I loved to love, seeking what I might love, loving to love." Augustine thus describes his state of mind when he was addicted to illicit sexual love; the true object of his desire, which compels the tortuous spiritual journey of his life, he later discovered to be the infinite and transcendent God.

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

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

6. I.e., with my love.

7. The sunset colors.

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

Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,
30 When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
Like an inspired and desperate alchemist
Staking his very life on some dark hope,
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
With my most innocent love, until strange tears
35 Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
Such magic as compels the charmed night
To render up thy charge: . . . and, though ne'er yet
Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,
Enough from incommunicable dream,
40 And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,
Has shone within me, that serenely now
And moveless,⁹ as a long-forgotten lyre *motionless*
Suspended in the solitary dome
Of some mysterious and deserted fane,⁹
45 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.¹

50 There was a Poet whose untimely tomb
No human hands with pious reverence reared,
But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds
Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid
Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—
55 A lovely youth,—no mourning maiden decked
With weeping flowers, or votive cypress wreath,²
The lone couch of his everlasting sleep:—
Gentle, and brave, and generous,—no lorn^o bard *abandoned*
Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh:
60 He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude.
Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,
And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined
And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.
The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn,
65 And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,
Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.

By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,
His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,
70 Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.
The fountains of divine philosophy
Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great
Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past

9. Temple. The narrator calls on the Mother, his natural muse, to make him her wind harp. Cf. the opening passage of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and the conclusions of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and *Adonais*.
1. Cf. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 94ff.:

"A presence . . . / Whose dwelling is . . . the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: / A motion and a spirit."
2. The cypress represented mourning. "Votive": offered to fulfill a vow to the gods.

In truth or fable consecrates, he felt
75 And knew. When early youth had past, he left
His cold fireside and alienated home
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.
Many a wide waste and tangled wilderness
Has lured his fearless steps; and he has bought
80 With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men,
His rest and food. Nature's most secret steps
He like her shadow has pursued, where'er
The red volcano overcanopies
Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice
85 With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes'
On black bare pointed islets ever beat
With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves
Rugged and dark, winding among the springs
Of fire and poison, inaccessible
90 To avarice or pride, their starry domes
Of diamond and of gold expand above
Numberless and immeasurable halls,
Frequent⁰ with crystal column, and clear shrines *crowded*
Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.⁴
95 Nor had that scene of ampler majesty
Than gems or gold, the varying roof of heaven
And the green earth lost in his heart its claims
To love and wonder; he would linger long
In lonesome vales, making the wild his home,
100 Until the doves and squirrels would partake
From his innocuous hand his bloodless food,⁵
Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks,
And the wild antelope, that starts whene'er
The dry leaf rustles in the brake,⁰ suspend *thicket*
105 Her timid steps to gaze upon a form
More graceful than her own.

His wandering step
Obedient to high thoughts, has visited
The awful⁰ ruins of the days of old: *awe-inspiring*
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec,⁶ and the waste
110 Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers
Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,
Memphis and Thebes,⁷ and whatsoe'er of strange
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,
115 Dark Ethiopia in her desert hills
Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,
Stupendous columns, and wild images
Of more than man, where marble daemons watch
The Zodiac's⁸ brazen mystery, and dead men

3. Lakes of pitch, flowing from a volcano.

4. An olive-green semiprecious stone.

5. Shelley was himself a vegetarian.

6. An ancient city in what is now Lebanon. Tyre was once an important commercial city on the Phoenician coast.

7. The ancient capital of Upper Egypt. Memphis

is the ruined capital of Lower Egypt.

8. In the temple of Isis at Denderah, Egypt, the Zodiac is represented on the ceiling. Journeying among the great civilizations of the past has taken the Poet backward in time to older and older cultures—from the Greeks to the Phoenicians, the Jews, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Finally

120 Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,⁸
He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day
Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
125 Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,
130 Her daily portion, from her father's tent,
And spread her matting for his couch, and stole
From duties and repose to tend his steps:—
Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe
To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,
135 Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips
Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath
Of innocent dreams arose: then, when red morn
Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home
Wildered,⁹ and wan, and panting, she returned.

bewildered.

140 The Poet wandering on, through Arabia
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,¹
And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down
Indus and Oxus² from their icy caves,
In joy and exultation held his way;
145 Till in the vale of Cashmire, far within
Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine
Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,
Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched
His languid limbs. A vision on his sleep
150 There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
155 Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held
His inmost sense suspended in its web
Of many-coloured woof³ and shifting hues.
Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
160 Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
Herself a poet. Soon the solemn mood
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame
A permeating fire: wild numbers⁴ then
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs
165 Subdued by its own pathos: her fair hands
Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp

weave

verse

he reaches Ethiopia (line 115), which had been described as the "cradle of the sciences." "Daemons": in Greek mythology, not evil spirits but minor deities or attendant spirits.

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

1. A desert in southern Persia,

2. Rivers in Asia,

Strange symphony, and in their branching veins
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.
The beating of her heart was heard to fill
170 The pauses of her music, and her breath
Tumultuously accorded with those fits
Of intermitted song. Sudden she rose,
As if her heart impatiently endured
Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,
175 And saw by the warm light of their own life
Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
180 Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.
His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess
Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled
His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
Her panting bosom: . . . she drew back a while,
185 Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.
Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night
Involved" and swallowed up the vision; sleep, *wrapped up*
190 Like a dark flood suspended in its course,
Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain.

Roused by the shock he started from his trance—
The cold white light of morning, the blue moon
Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,
195 The distinct valley and the vacant woods,
Spread round him where he stood. Whither have fled
The hues of heaven that canopied his bower
Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,
The mystery and the majesty of Earth,
200 The joy, the exultation? His wan eyes
Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly
As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.
The spirit of sweet human love has sent
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned
205 Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues
Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;³ *phantom*
He overleaps the bounds. Alas! alas!
Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined
Thus treacherously? Lost, lost, for ever lost,
210 In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep,
That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,
O Sleep?³ Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,
And pendent³ mountains seen in the calm lake, *jutting, overhanging*
215 Lead only to a black and watery depth,
While death's blue vault, with loathliest vapours hung,

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

Where every shade which the foul grave exhales
Hides its dead eye from the detested day,
Conduct, O Sleep, to thy delightful realms?
220 This doubt with sudden tide flowed on his heart,
The insatiate hope which it awakened, stung
His brain even like despair.
While day-light held
The sky, the Poet kept mute conference
With his still soul. At night the passion came,
225 Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,
And shook him from his rest, and led him forth
Into the darkness.—As an eagle grasped
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast
Burn with the poison, and precipitates⁴ *hastens*
230 Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight
O'er the wide aery wilderness:⁵ thus driven
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,
235 Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,
Startling with careless step the moon-light snake,
He fled. Red morning dawned upon his flight,
Shedding the mockery of its vital hues
Upon his cheek of death. He wandered on
240 Till vast Aornos seen from Petra's⁶ steep
Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;
Through Balk,⁷ and where the desolated tombs
Of Parthian kings⁷ scatter to every wind
Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,
245 Day after day, a weary waste of hours,
Bearing within his life the brooding care
That ever fed on its decaying flame.
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering
250 Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand
Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone
As in a furnace burning secretly
From his dark eyes alone. The cottagers,
255 Who ministered with human charity
His human wants, beheld with wondering awe
Their fleeting visitant. The mountaineer,
Encountering on some dizzy precipice
That spectral form, deemed that the Spirit of wind
260 With lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet
Disturbing not the drifted snow, had paused
In its career: the infant would conceal
His troubled visage in his mother's robe

4. The eagle and serpent locked in mortal combat is a recurrent image in Shelley's poems (see *Prometheus Unbound* 3.1.72-73, p. 811).

5. The rock (literal trans.); "Petra's steep" is a mountain stronghold in the northern part of

ancient Arabia. Aornos is a high mountain.

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

7. The Parthians inhabited northern Persia.

In terror at the glare of those wild eyes,
265 To remember their strange light in many a dream
Of after-times; but youthful maidens, taught
By nature, would interpret half the woe
That wasted him, would call him with false⁸ names *mistaken*
Brother, and friend, would press his pallid hand
270 At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path
Of his departure from their father's door.

At length upon the lone Chorasmian shore⁸
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste
Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged
275 His steps to the sea-shore. A swan was there,
Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.
It rose as he approached, and with strong wings
Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
High over the immeasurable main.
280 His eyes pursued its flight.—"Thou hast a home,
Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.
285 And what am I that I should linger here,
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven
290 That echoes not my thoughts?" A gloomy smile
Of desperate hope convulsed his curling lips
For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly
Its precious charge,⁹ and silent death exposed,
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,
295 With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around.
There was no fair fiend¹ near him, not a sight
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.
A little shallop² floating near the shore
300 Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.
It had been long abandoned, for its sides
Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints
Swayed with the undulations of the tide.
A restless impulse urged him to embark
305 And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;
For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves
The slimy caverns of the populous deep.

The day was fair and sunny; sea and sky
Drank its inspiring radiance, and the wind

8. The shore of Lake Aral, about 175 miles east of the Caspian Sea.

9. I.e., the maiden in the sleeper's dream.

1. Apparently he suspects there may have been an

external agent luring him to the death described in the preceding lines.

2. A small open boat.

310 Swept strongly from the shore, blackening the waves.
Following his eager soul, the wanderer
Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft
On the bare mast, and took his lonely seat,
And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea
315 Like a torn cloud before the hurricane.³

As one that in a silver vision floats
Obedient to the sweep of odorous winds
Upon resplendent clouds, so rapidly
Along the dark and ruffled waters fled
The straining boat. – A whirlwind swept it on,
With fierce gusts and precipitating force,
Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.
The waves arose. Higher and higher still
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's scourge
Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.
Calm and rejoicing in the fearful war
Of wave ruining" on wave, and blast on blast *crashing*
Descending, and black flood on whirlpool driven
With dark obliterating course, he sate:
As if their genii were the ministers
Appointed to conduct him to the light
Of those beloved eyes, the Poet sate
Holding the steady helm. Evening came on,
The beams of sunset hung their rainbow hues
High 'mid the shifting domes of sheeted spray
That canopied his path o'er the waste deep;
Twilight, ascending slowly from the east,
Entwin'd in dusker wreaths her braided locks
O'er the fair front and radiant eyes of day;
Night followed, clad with stars. On every side
More horribly the multitudinous streams
Of ocean's mountainous waste to mutual war
Rushed in dark tumult thundering, as to mock
The calm and spangled sky. The little boat
Still fled before the storm; still fled, like foam
Down the steep cataract of a wintry river;
Now pausing on the edge of the riven" wave; *torn asunder*
Now leaving far behind the bursting mass
That fell, convulsing ocean. Safely fled –
As if that frail and wasted human form,
Had been an elemental god.⁴

At midnight
The moon arose: and lo! the ethereal cliffs⁵
Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone
Among the stars like sunlight, and around

3. If the Poet's boat is being carried upstream on the Oxus River from the Aral Sea to the river's headwaters in the Hindu Kush Mountains (the "Indian Caucasus" that is the setting for *Prometheus Unbound*), then the journey is taking him to a region that the naturalist Buffon (whom Shelley often read) had identified as the cradle of the

human race. But it is also possible that the starting point for this journey is the Caspian Sea, in which case the journey would end near the traditional site of the Garden of Eden.

4. A god of one of the natural elements (see line 1).

5. I.e., cliffs high in the air.

355 Whose cavern'd base the whirlpools and the waves
Bursting and eddying irresistibly
Rage and resound for ever.—Who shall save?—
The boat fled on,—the boiling torrent drove,—
The crags closed round with black and jagged arms,
360 The shattered mountain overhung the sea,
And faster still, beyond all human speed,
Suspended on the sweep of the smooth wave,
The little boat was driven. A cavern there
Yawned, and amid its slant and winding depths
365 Ingulphed the rushing sea. The boat fled on
With unrelaxing speed.—"Vision and Love!"
The Poet cried aloud, "I have beheld
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death
Shall not divide us long!"

The boat pursued

370 The winding of the cavern. Day-light shone
At length upon that gloomy river's flow;
Now, where the fiercest war among the waves
Is calm, on the unfathomable stream
The boat moved slowly. Where the mountain, riven,
375 Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,
Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell
Even to the base of Caucasus, with sound
That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass
Filled with one whirlpool all that ample chasm;
380 Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,
Circling immeasurably fast, and laved^d *washed*
With alternating dash the knarled roots
Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms
In darkness over it. In the midst was left,
385 Reflecting, yet distorting every cloud,
A pool of treacherous and tremendous calm.
Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,
390 Till on the verge of the extremest curve,
Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,
The waters overflow, and a smooth spot
Of glassy quiet mid those battling tides
Is left, the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink
395 Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
Of that resistless gulph embosom it?
Now shall it fall?—A wandering stream of wind,
Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,
And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks
400 Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,
Beneath a woven grove it sails, and, hark!
The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar,
With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods.
Where the embowering trees recede, and leave
405 A little space of green expanse, the cove

Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,
Reflected in the crystal calm. The wave
Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,
410 Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,
Or falling spear-grass, or their own decay
Had e'er disturbed before. The Poet longed
To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,
But on his heart its solitude returned,
415 And he forbore.⁶ Not the strong impulse hid
In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame,
Had yet performed its ministry: it hung
Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud
Gleams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods
Of night close over it.
420 The noonday sun
Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass
Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence
A narrow vale embosoms. There, huge caves,
Scooped in the dark base of their aery rocks
425 Mocking⁷ its moans, respond and roar for ever.
The meeting boughs and implicated⁸ leaves *intertwined*
Wove twilight o'er the Poet's path, as led
By love, or dream, or god, or mightier Death,
He sought in Nature's dearest haunt, some bank,
430 Her cradle, and his sepulchre. More dark
And dark the shades accumulate. The oak,
Expanding its immense and knotty arms,
Embraces the light beech. The pyramids
Of the tall cedar overarching, frame
435 Most solemn domes within, and far below.
Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,
The ash and the acacia floating hang
Tremulous and pale. Like restless serpents, clothed
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,
440 Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around
The grey trunks, and, as gamesome infants' eyes,
With gentle meanings, and most innocent wiles,
Fold their beams round the hearts of those that love,
These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs
445 Uniting their close union; the woven leaves
Make net-work of the dark blue light of day,
And the night's noontide clearness, mutable
As shapes in the weird clouds. Soft mossy lawns
Beneath these canopies extend their swells,
450 Fragrant with perfumed herbs, and eyed with blooms
Minute yet beautiful. One darkest glen
Sends from its woods of musk-rose, twined with jasmine,

6. The "yellow flowers" overhanging their own reflection (lines 406—08), probably narcissus, may signify the narcissistic temptation of the Poet to be satisfied with a projection of his own self. But his need for an unearthly Other revives, and "the

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

A soul-dissolving odour, to invite
To some more lovely mystery. Through the dell,
45 Silence and Twilight here, twin-sisters, keep
Their noonday watch, and sail among the shades,
Like vaporous shapes half seen; beyond, a well,
Dark, gleaming, and of most translucent wave,
Images all the woven boughs above,
460 And each depending leaf, and every speck
Of azure sky, darting between their chasms;
Nor aught else in the liquid mirror laves
Its portraiture, but some inconstant star
Between one foliated lattice twinkling fair,
465 Or, painted bird, sleeping beneath the moon,
Or gorgeous insect floating motionless,
Unconscious of the day, ere yet his wings
Have spread their glories to the gaze of noon.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld
470 Their own wan light through the reflected lines
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. He heard
475 The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed
480 To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery;—
But, undulating woods, and silent well,
485 And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom
Now deepening the dark shades, for speech assuming
Held commune with him, as if he and it
Were all that was,—only . . . when his regard
Was raised by intense pensiveness, . . . two eyes,
490 Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles
To beckon him.

Obedient to the light
That shone within his soul, he went, pursuing
The windings of the dell.—The rivulet
495 Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine
Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell
Among the moss with hollow harmony
Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones
It danced; like childhood laughing as it went:
500 Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,
Reflecting every herb and drooping bud
That overhung its quietness.—"O stream!

Whose source is inaccessibly profound,
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?
50? Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course *undiscoverahle*
Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,
And measureless ocean may declare as soon
510 What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud
Contains thy waters, as the universe
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste
I' the passing wind!"

Beside the grassy shore
515 Of the small stream he went; he did impress
On the green moss his tremulous step, that caught
Strong shuddering from his burning limbs. As one
Roused by some joyous madness from the couch
Of fever, he did move; yet, not like him,
520 Forgetful of the grave, where, when the flame
Of his frail exultation shall be spent,
He must descend. With rapid steps he went
Reneath the shade of trees, beside the flow
Of the wild babbling rivulet; and now
525 The forest's solemn canopies were changed
For the uniform and lightsome evening sky. *luminous*
Grey rocks did peep from the spare moss, and stemmed
The struggling brook: tall spires of windlestrae⁸
Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope,
530 And nought but knarled roots⁹ of antient pines
Rranchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots
The unwilling soil. A gradual change was here,
Yet ghastly. For, as fast years flow away,
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin
535 And white, and where irradiate¹ dewy eyes *illumined*
Had shone, gleam stony orbs:—so from his steps
Bright flowers departed, and the beautiful shade
Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds
And musical motions. Calm, he still pursued
540 The stream, that with a larger volume now
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there
Fretted a path through its descending curves
With its wintry speed. On every side now rose
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,
545 Lifted their black and barren pinnacles
In the light of evening, and its precipice¹
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,
Mid toppling stones, black gulphs and yawning caves,
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues

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

9. Probably an error for "stumps" or "trunks."
1. Headlong fall (of the stream, line 540).

550 To the loud stream. Lo! where the pass expands
Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,
And seems, with its accumulated crags,
To overhang the world: for wide expand
Beneath the wan stars and descending moon
555 Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,
Dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom
Of leaden-coloured even, and fiery hills
Mingling their flames with twilight, on the verge
Of the remote horizon. The near² scene, *nearby*
560 In naked and severe simplicity,
Made contrast with the universe. A pine,²
Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy
Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast
Yielding one only response, at each pause
565 In most familiar cadence, with the howl
The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams
Mingling its solemn song, whilst the broad river,
Foaming and hurrying o'er its rugged path,
Fell into that immeasurable void
570 Scattering its waters to the passing winds.

Yet the grey precipice and solemn pine
And torrent, were not all;—one silent nook
Was there. Even on the edge of that vast mountain,
Upheld by knotty roots and fallen rocks,
575 It overlooked in its serenity
The dark earth, and the bending vault of stars.
It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile
Even in the lap of horror. Ivy clasped
The fissured stones with its entwining arms,
580 And did embower with leaves for ever green,
And berries dark, the smooth and even space
Of its inviolated floor, and here
The children of the autumnal whirlwind bore,
In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay,
585 Red, yellow, or etherially pale,
Rivals the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt
Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach
The wilds to love tranquillity. One step,
One human step alone, has ever broken
590 The stillness of its solitude:—one voice
Alone inspired its echoes,—even that voice
Which hither came, floating among the winds,
And led the loveliest among human forms
To make their wild haunts the depository
595 Of all the grace and beauty that endued
Its motions, render up its majesty,
Scatter its music on the unfeeling storm,
And to the damp leaves and blue cavern mould,

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

Nurses of rainbow flowers and branching moss,
600 Commit the colours of that varying cheek,
That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

The dim and horned³ moon hung low, and poured
A sea of lustre on the horizon's verge
That overflowed its mountains. Yellow mist
605 Filled the unbounded atmosphere, and drank
Wan moonlight even to fulness: not a star
Shone, not a sound was heard; the very winds,
Danger's grim playmates, on that precipice
Slept, clasped in his embrace.—O, storm of death!
610 Whose sightless⁴ speed divides this sullen night:
And thou, colossal Skeleton,⁵ that, still
Guiding its irresistible career
In thy devastating omnipotence,
Art king of this frail world, from the red field
615 Of slaughter, from the reeking hospital,
The patriot's sacred couch, the snowy bed
Of innocence, the scaffold and the throne,
A mighty voice invokes thee. Ruin calls
His brother Death. A rare and regal prey
620 He hath prepared, prowling around the world;
Glutted with which thou mayst repose, and men
Go to their graves like flowers or creeping worms,
Nor ever more offer at thy dark shrine
The unheeded tribute of a broken heart.

Death

625 When on the threshold of the green recess
The wanderer's footsteps fell, he knew that death
Was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled,
Did he resign his high and holy soul
To images of the majestic past,
630 That paused within his passive being now,
Like winds that bear sweet music, when they breathe
Through some dim latticed chamber. He did place
His pale lean hand upon the rugged trunk
Of the old pine. Upon an ivied stone
635 Reclined his languid head, his limbs did rest,
Diffused and motionless, on the smooth brink
Of that obscurest⁶ chasm;—and thus he lay,
Surrendering to their final impulses
The hovering powers of life. Hope and despair,
640 The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear
Marred his repose, the influxes of sense,
And his own being unalloyed by pain,
Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed
The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there
645 At peace, and faintly smiling:—his last sight
Was the great moon, which o'er the western line

darkest

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

new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms."
4. Invisible, or perhaps "unseeing."

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

O, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,
Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam
With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale
675 From vernal blooms fresh fragrance!^r O, that God,
Profuse of poisons, would concede the chalice
Which but one living man^r has drained, who now,
Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels
No proud exemption in the blighting curse
680 He bears, over the world wanders for ever,
Lone as incarnate death! O, that the dream
Of dark magician in his visioned cave,^r
Raking the cinders of a crucible
For life and power, even when his feeble hand
685 Shakes in its last decay, were the true law
Of this so lovely world! But thou art fled
Like some frail exhalation;^r which the dawn *mist*
Robes in its golden beams,—ah! thou hast fled!
The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,

5. I.e., the moon. "Meteor" was once used for any phenomenon in the skies, as our modern term "meteorology" suggests.

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

7. Attended, acted as a servant to.

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

ses 7.275ff.).

9. The Wandering Jew. According to a medieval legend, he had taunted Christ on the way to the crucifixion and was condemned to wander the world, deathless, until Christ's second coming.

1. Cave in which he has visions. "Dark magician": an alchemist attempting to produce the elixir of enduring life. Alchemy intrigued both Shelleys. See Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" (p. 960).

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690 The child of grace and genius. Heartless things
Are done and said i' the world, and many worms
And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth
From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,
In vesper² low or joyous orison,³ prayer
695 Lifts still its solemn voice:—but thou art fled—
Thou canst no longer know or love the shapes
Of this phantasmal scene, who have to thee
Been purest ministers, who are, alas!
Now thou art not. Upon those pallid lips
700 So sweet even **in** their silence, on those eyes
That image sleep in death, upon that form
Yet safe from the worm's outrage, let no tear
Be shed—not even in thought. Nor, when those hues
Are gone, and those divinest lineaments,
705 Worn by the senseless⁴ wind, shall live alone *unfeeling*
In the frail pauses of this simple strain,
Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting's woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
710 Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,
And all the shews o' the world are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
It is a woe too "deep for tears,"⁵ when all
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
715 Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
720 Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

1815

1816

Mont Blanc¹

Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs

2. Evening prayer.

3. From the last line of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

1. "Mont Blanc," in which Shelley both echoes and argues with the poetry of natural description written by Wordsworth and Coleridge, was first published as the conclusion to the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*. This was a book that Percy and Mary Shelley wrote together detailing the excursion that they and Claire Clairmont took in July 1816 to the valley of Chamonix, in what is now southeastern

France. That valley lies at the foot of Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps and in all Europe.

In the *History* Percy Shelley commented on his poem: "It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects it attempts to describe; and, as an indisciplined overflowing of the soul rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang." He was inspired to write the poem while standing on a bridge spanning the river Arve, which flows through the valley

5 The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own.
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where waterfalls around it leap forever,
10 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

2

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
is Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awfuP scene, *awe-inspiring*
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie,
20 Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,
Children of elder^o time, in whose devotion *earlier, ancient*
The chainless winds still come and ever came
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
To hear—an old and solemn harmony;
25 Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
Of the etherial waterfall, whose veil
Robes some unsculptured^d image; the strange sleep
Which when the voices of the desert fail
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—
30 Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
Thou art the path of that unresting sound—
Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
35 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate phantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
40 With the clear universe of things around;³
One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,

of Chamonix and is fed from above by the melt-off of the glacier, the Mer de Glace.

In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock drafted in the same week as "Mont Blanc," Shelley had recalled that the count de Buffon, a French pioneer of the science we now know as geology, had proposed a "sublime but gloomy theory—that this globe which we inhabit will at some future period be changed to a mass of frost." This sense, which Shelley takes from Buffon, of a Nature that is utterly alien and indifferent to human beings (and whose history takes shape on a timescale of incomprehensible immensity) is counterposed throughout "Mont Blanc" with Shelley's interest, fueled by his reading of 18th-century skeptics such as David Hume, in questions about the human mind, its

powers, and the limits of knowledge. "All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient," Shelley would later write in "A Defence of Poetry" (p. 837). In "Mont Blanc" the priority that this statement gives to the mind over the external world is challenged by the sheer destructive power of the mountain.

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

3. This passage is remarkably parallel to a passage Shelley could not have read in *The Prelude*, first published in 1850, in which Wordsworth discovers, in the landscape viewed from Mount Snowdon, the "type" or "emblem" of the human mind in its interchange with nature (see *The Prelude* 14.63ft¹, p. 386).

In the still cave of the witch Poesy,⁴
45 Seeking among the shadows that pass by
Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!⁵

3

Some say that gleams of a remoter world
50 Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber,
And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber
Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled
The veil of life and death? or do I lie
55 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
Spread far around and inaccessible
Its circles? For the very spirit fails,
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep
That vanishes among the viewless⁶ gales!
60 Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
65 Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steeps;
A desert peopled by the storms alone,
Save^o when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,
And the wolf tracts⁷ her there—how hideously
70 Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven.—Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-dæmon⁸ taught her young
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?
75 None can reply—all seems eternal now.
The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith⁷ with nature reconciled;
80 Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which⁸ the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

invisible

*except
tracks*

split

4. I.e., in the part of the mind that creates poetry.
5. I.e., the thoughts (line 41) seek, in the poet's creative faculty, some shade, phantom, or image of the Ravine of the Arve; and when the breast, which has forgotten these images, recalls them again—there, suddenly, the Arve exists.

6. A supernatural being, halfway between mortals and the gods. Here it represents the force that makes earthquakes. Shelley views this landscape as the product of violent geological upheavals in the past.

7. I.e., "simply by holding such faith." In Shelley's

balance of possibilities, the landscape is equally capable either of instilling such a Wordsworthian faith (in the possibility of reconciling humans and nature, lines 78—79) or of producing the "awful" (i.e., "awesome") doubt (that nature is totally alien to human needs and values). For Wordsworth's faith in the correspondence of Nature and human thoughts and his conviction that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her," see "Tintern Abbey," lines 122-23.

8. The reference is to "voice," line 80.

4

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
85 Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
Within the daedal⁹ earth; lightning, and rain,
Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,
The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep
90 Holds every future leaf and flower;—the bound
With which from that detested trance they leap;
The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
And that of him and all that his may be;
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
95 Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.
Power dwells apart in its tranquillity
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:
And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,
On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains
100 Teach the adverting⁰ mind. The glaciers creep *observant*
Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains,
Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice,
Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
105 A city of death, distinct with many a tower
And wall impregnable of beaming ice.
Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing
110 Its destined path, or in the mangled soil
Branchless and shattered stand: the rocks, drawn down
From yon remotest waste, have overthrown
The limits of the dead and living world,
Never to be reclaimed. The dwelling-place
115 Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;
Their food and their retreat for ever gone,
So much of life and joy is lost. The race
Of man, flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,
120 And their place is not known. Below, vast caves
Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling'
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,²
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever
125 Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

5

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,
The still and solemn power of many sights,

9. Intricately formed; derived from Daedalus, builder of the labyrinth in Crete.

1. This description (as well as that in lines 9–11) seems to be an echo of Coleridge's description of the chasm and sacred river in the recently pub-

lished "Kubla Khan," lines 12-24.

2. The Arve, which flows into Lake Geneva. Nearby the river Rhone flows out of Lake Geneva to begin its course through France and into the Mediterranean.

766 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

And many sounds, and much of life and death.
130 In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them:—Winds contend
135 Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow. The secret strength of things
140 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou,^o and earth, and stars, and sea, *Mont Blanc*
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

1816

1817

Hymn to Intellectual Beauty¹

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,²
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
Like memory of music fled,—
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

2

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
Ask why the sunlight not forever
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river,
Why aught^o should fail and fade that once is shewn, *anything*
Why fear and dream and death and birth
Cast on the daylight of this earth
Such gloom,—why man has such a scope
For love and hate, despondency and hope?

1. "Intellectual" means nonmaterial, that which is beyond access to the human senses. In this poem intellectual beauty is something postulated to account for occasional states of awareness that

lend splendor, grace, and truth both to the natural world and to people's moral consciousness,
2. Used as a verb,

3

25 No voice from some sublimer world hath ever
 To sage or poet these responses given –
 Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,
Remain the records of their vain endeavour,³
Frail spells—whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
30 From all we hear and all we see,
 Doubt, chance, and mutability.
Thy light alone—like mist o'er mountains driven,
 Or music by the night wind sent
 Through strings of some still instrument,⁰ *wind harp*
35 Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

4

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart
 And come, for some uncertain moments lent.
 Man were immortal, and omnipotent,
40 Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.⁴
 Thou messenger of sympathies,
 That wax and wane in lovers' eyes –
Thou – that to human thought art nourishment,
45 Like darkness to a dying flame!⁵
 Depart not as thy shadow came,
 Depart not—lest the grave should be,
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

5

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
50 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;⁶
 I was not heard—I saw them not –
55 When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
 All vital things that wake to bring
 News of buds and blossoming, –
 Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;
60 I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!

6

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
 To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?
 With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
65 Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers

3. The names (line 27) represent nothing better than the feeble guesses that philosophers and poets have made in attempting to answer the questions posed in stanza 2, but these guesses also delude us as though they were magic spells.

4. I.e., "man would be immortal . . . if thou didst keep."

5. Darkness may be said to nourish the dying flame by providing the contrast that offsets its light.

6. Lines 49–52 refer to Shelley's youthful experiments with magic. The "poisonous names" may be the religious terms ("God and ghosts and Heaven") of line 27.

768 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Of studious zeal or love's delight
Outwatched with me the envious night⁷ –
They know that never joy illumed my brow
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
70 This world from its dark slavery,
That thou – O awful LOVELINESS,
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.

7

The day becomes more solemn and serene
When noon is past – there is a harmony
75 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
so 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 fear⁸ himself, and love all human kind.

1816

1817

Ozymandias¹

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said – "Two vast and trunkless⁰ legs of stone *without a torso*
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
5 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive,⁰ stamped on these lifeless things, *outlive*
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;²
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
10 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

1817

1818

7. I.e., stayed up until the night, envious of their delight, had reluctantly departed.

8. Probably in the old sense: "to stand in awe of."

1. According to Diodorus Siculus, Greek historian of the 1st century B.C.E., the largest statue in Egypt had the inscription "I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and

where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits." Ozymandias was the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, 13th century B.C.E.

2. "The hand" is the sculptor's, who had "mocked" (both imitated and satirized) the sculptured passions; "the heart" is the king's, which has "fed" his passions.

Stanzas Written in Dejection-
December 1818, near Naples¹

The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent might,
5 The breath of the moist earth is light
Around its unexpanded buds;
Like many a voice of one delight
The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;
The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

io I see the Deep's untrampled floor
With green and purple seaweeds strown;
I see the waves upon the shore
Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;
I sit upon the sands alone;

is The lightning of the noontide Ocean
Is flashing round me, and a tone
Arises from its measured motion,
How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

Alas, I have nor hope nor health
20 Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage² in meditation found,
And walked with inward glory crowned;
Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure –
25 Others I see whom these surround,
Smiling they live and call life pleasure:
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

Yet now despair itself is mild,
Even as the winds and waters are;
30 I could lie down like a tired child
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne and yet must bear
Till Death like Sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
35 My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Some might lament that I were cold,
As I, when this sweet day is gone,³
Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,
40 Insults with this untimely moan –

1. Shelley's first wife, Harriet, had drowned herself; Clara, his baby daughter with Mary Shelley, had just died; and he was plagued by ill health, pain, financial worries, and the sense that he had failed as a poet.

2. Probably the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (2nd century C.E.), Stoic philosopher who wrote twelve books of *Meditations*.

3. I.e., as I will lament this sweet day when it has gone.

770 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

They might lament,—for I am one
Whom men love not, and yet regret;
Unlike this day, which, when the Sun
Shall on its stainless glory set,
45 Will linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet.

1818

1824

A Song: "Men of England"¹

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

5 Wherefore feed and clothe and save
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—'nay, drink your blood?

Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
10 Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
That these stingless drones may spoil
The forced produce of your toil?

Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
15 Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
20 The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth—let no impostor heap:
Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
Forge arms—in your defence to bear.

25 Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells—
In halls ye deck another dwells.
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade and hoe and loom
30 Trace your grave and build your tomb

1. This and the two following poems were written at a time of turbulent unrest, after the return of troops from the Napoleonic Wars had precipitated a great economic depression. The "Song," express-

ing Shelley's hope for a proletarian revolution, was originally planned as one of a series for workers. It has become, as the poet wished, a hymn of the British labor movement.

And weave your winding-sheet – till fair
England be your Sepulchre.

1819

1839

England in 1819

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;¹
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, – mud from a muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,
s But leechlike to their fainting country cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.
A people starved and stabbed in th' unfilled field;²
An army, whom liberticide³ and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
10 Golden and sanguine laws⁴ which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless – a book sealed;
A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed –
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom⁵ may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

1819

1839

To Sidmouth and Castlereagh¹

As from their ancestral oak
Two empty ravens wind their clarion,
Yell by yell, and croak by croak,
When they scent the noonday smoke
5 Of fresh human carrion: –

As two gibbering night-birds flit
From their bowers of deadly yew
Through the night to frighten it –
When the moon is in a fit,
io And the stars are none, or few: –

As a shark and dogfish wait
Under an Atlantic isle

1. George III, who had been declared insane in 1811. He died in 1820.

2. Alluding to the Peterloo Massacre on August 16, 1819. In St. Peter's field, near Manchester, a troop of cavalry had charged into a crowd attending a peaceful rally in support of parliamentary reform. "Peterloo" is an ironic combination of "St. Peter's" and "Waterloo."

3. The killing of liberty.

4. Laws bought with gold and leading to bloodshed.

5. I.e., a revolution.

1. Shelley's powerful satire is directed against Viscount Castlereagh, foreign secretary during 1812–22, who took a leading part in the European settlement after the Battle of Waterloo, and Viscount Sidmouth (1757–1844), the home secretary, whose cruelly coercive measures (supported by Castlereagh) against unrest in the laboring classes were in large part responsible for the Peterloo Massacre.

When this poem was reprinted by Mary Shelley in 1839, it was given the title "Similes for Two Political Characters of 1819."

772 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

For the Negro-ship, whose freight
Is the theme of their debate,
15 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

1832

To William Shelley¹

i

My lost William, thou in whom
Some bright spirit lived, and did
That decaying robe consume
Which its lustre faintly hid, –
5 Here its ashes find a tomb,
But beneath this pyramid²
Thou art not – if a thing divine
Like thee can die, thy funeral shrine
Is thy mother's grief and mine.

2

io Where art thou, my gentle child?
Let me think thy spirit feeds,
With its life intense and mild,
The love of living leaves and weeds
Among these tombs and ruins wild; –
15 Let me think that through low seeds
Of sweet flowers and sunny grass
Into their hues and scents may pass
A portion

1819

1824

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,

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

1. The Shelleys' son William, who died of malaria in June 1819, age three and a half years, was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. These unfinished lines were discovered among the poet's papers by his widow, Mary Shelley (the grieving mother of line 9), who published them in her husband's *Posthumous Poems* (1824).

2. The Shelleys, who left Rome shortly after William's death, ordered the construction of a small stone pyramid to mark his grave. This is not, except perhaps obliquely, a reference to the famous tomb, a 150-foot pyramid, of the 1st-century B.C.E. Roman magistrate Caius Cestius just outside the cemetery.

1. This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on

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,

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 Maenad,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,⁰ from whose solid atmosphere *clouds*
Black rain and fire and hail will burst: O hear!

3

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

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—for example, 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 that is paralleled to the inspiration of prophets. 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 of the 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.

6. In the old sense of messengers.

7. A female worshipper 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.

Beside a pumice isle in Baise'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

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

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

4

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
45 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

The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
50 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,

9. West of Naples, the locale of imposing villas 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. 957).

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. 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.

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

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
70 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 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 hsec 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 arbi-

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 suf-

fering. 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).

trary 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 Æschylus, 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 Æschylus; 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 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

2. Shelley's description of the subject of Æschylus's lost drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, is a spec-

ulation based on surviving fragments.

3. Slippery reasoning.

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 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

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. 849).

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 ^Eschylus 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 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/Eschylus 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.

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 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.

Prometheus Unbound

Act 1

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 Daemons, and all Spirits

But One,² 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 hecatombs³ of broken hearts,
With fear and self contempt and barren hope;
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless⁴ in hate, *blinded*
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—aye⁵ divided by keen pangs *always*
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,
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 deigned⁴ 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,⁰ *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;⁵ and shapeless sights come wandering by,

1. Ione, Panthea, and Asia (introduced in the following scene) are sisters and Oceanids—i.e., daughters of Oceanus.

2. Demogorgon (see 2.4). "Daemons": supernatural beings, intermediary between gods and mortals. Prometheus is addressing Jupiter.

3. Large sacrificial offerings.

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

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

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,⁶ one among whom
— As some dark Priest hales⁰ the reluctant victim —
Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood
From these pale feet,⁷ which then might trample thee
If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.
Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.⁸ — 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
Once breathed on thee I would recall.⁹ Ye Mountains,
Whose many-voiced Echoes, through the mist
Of cataracts, flung the thunder of that spell!
Ye icy Springs, stagnant with wrinkling frost,
Which vibrated to hear me, and then crept
Shuddering through India! Thou serenest Air,
Through which the Sun walks burning without beams!
And ye swift Whirlwinds, who on poised wings
Hung mute and moveless o'er yon hushed abyss,
As thunder louder than your own made rock
The orb'd world! If then my words had power
— Though I am changed so that aught evil wish
Is dead within, although no memory be
Of what is hate — let them not lose it now!¹
What was that curse? for ye all heard me speak.

drags

FIRST VOICE: *from the Mountains*

Thrice three hundred thousand years
O'er the Earthquake's couch we stood;
Oft as men convulsed with fears
We trembled in our multitude.

SECOND VOICE: *from the Springs*

Thunderbolts had parched out water,
We had been stained with bitter blood,

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

7. One of a number of implied parallels between the agony of Prometheus and the passion of Christ.

8. 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.

9. I.e., remember. But the word's alternative sense, "revoke," will later become crucial.

1. Let my words not lose their power now.

so And had run mute 'mid shrieks of slaughter
Through a city and a solitude!

THIRD VOICE: *from the Air*

I had clothed since Earth uprose
Its wastes in colours not their own,
And oft had my serene repose
85 Been cloven by many a rending groan.

FOURTH VOICE: *from the Whirlwinds*

We had soared beneath these mountains
Unresting ages;—nor had thunder
Nor yon Volcano's flaming fountains
Nor any power above or under
90 Ever made us mute with wonder!

FIRST VOICE

But never bowed our snowy crest
As at the voice of thine unrest.

SECOND VOICE

Never such a sound before
To the Indian waves we bore.—
95 A pilot asleep on the howling sea
Leaped up from the deck in agony
And heard, and cried, "Ah, woe is me!"
And died as mad as the wild waves be.

THIRD VOICE

By such dread words from Earth to Heaven
100 My still realm was never riven;
When its wound was closed, there stood
Darkness o'er the Day, like blood.

FOURTH VOICE

And we shrank back—for dreams of ruin
To frozen caves our flight pursuing
105 Made us keep silence—thus—and thus—
Though silence is as hell to us.

THE EARTH

The tongueless Caverns of the craggy hills
Cried "Misery!" then; the hollow Heaven replied,
"Misery!" And the Ocean's purple waves,
110 Climbing the land, howled to the lashing winds.
And the pale nations heard it,— "Misery!"

PROMETHEUS

I hear a sound of voices—not the voice
Which I gave forth.—Mother,⁰ thy sons and thou
Scorn him, without whose all-enduring will
115 Beneath the fierce omnipotence of Jove

Earth

Both they and thou had vanished like thin mist
Unrolled on the morning wind!—Know ye not me,
The Titan, he who made his agony
The barrier to your else all-conquering foe?
120 O rock-embosomed lawns and snow-fed streams
Now seen athwart frore vapours² deep below,
Through whose o'er-shadowing woods I wandered once
With Asia, drinking life from her loved eyes;
Why scorns the spirit which informs ye, now
125 To commune with me? me alone, who checked—
As one who checks a fiend-drawn charioteer—
The falshood and the force of Him who reigns
Supreme, and with the groans of pining slaves
Fills your dim glens and liquid wildernesses?
Why answer ye not, still? brethren!

THE EARTH
130 They dare not.

PROMETHEUS
Who dares? for I would hear that curse again. . . .
Ha, what an awful whisper rises up!
'Tis scarce like sound, it tingles through the frame
As lightning tingles, hovering ere it strike.—
135 Speak, Spirit! from thine inorganic voice
I only know that thou art moving near
And love. How cursed I him?

THE EARTH
How canst thou hear
Who knowest not the language of the dead?

PROMETHEUS
Thou art a living spirit—speak as they.

THE EARTH
140 I dare not speak like life, lest Heaven's felf King *cruel*
Should hear, and link me to some wheel of pain
More torturing than the one whereon I roll.—
Subtle thou art and good, and though the Gods
Hear not this voice—yet thou art more than God
145 Being wise and kind—earnestly hearken now.—

PROMETHEUS
Obscurely through my brain like shadows dim
Sweep awful^o thoughts, rapid and thick.—I feel *axve-inspiring*
Faint, like one mingled in entwining love,
Yet 'tis not pleasure.

2. Through frosty vapors.

THE EARTH

No, thou canst not hear:
150 Thou art immortal, and this tongue is known
Only to those who die . . .

PROMETHEUS

And what art thou,
O melancholy Voice?

THE EARTH

I am the Earth,
Thy mother, she within whose stony veins
To the last fibre of the loftiest tree
155 Whose thin leaves trembled in the frozen air
Joy ran, as blood within a living frame,
When thou didst from her bosom, like a cloud
Of glory, arise, a spirit of keen joy!
And at thy voice her pining sons uplifted
160 Their prostrate brows from the polluting dust
And our almighty Tyrant with fierce dread
Grew pale—until his thunder chained thee here.—
Then—see those million worlds which burn and roll
Around us: their inhabitants beheld
165 My sphered light wane in wide Heaven; the sea
Was lifted by strange tempest, and new fire
From earthquake-rifted mountains of bright snow
Shook its portentous hair beneath Heaven's frown;
Lightning and Inundation vexed the plains;
170 Blue thistles bloomed in cities; foodless toads
Within voluptuous chambers panting crawled;
When Plague had fallen on man and beast and worm,
And Famine,—and black blight on herb and tree,
And in the corn and vines and meadow-grass
175 Teemed ineradicable poisonous weeds
Draining their growth, for my wan breast was dry
With grief,—and the thin air, my breath, was stained
With the contagion of a mother's hate
Breathed on her child's destroyer—aye, I heard
180 Thy curse, the which if thou rememberest not
Yet my innumerable seas and streams,
Mountains and caves and winds, and yon wide Air
And the inarticulate people of the dead
Preserve, a treasured spell. We meditate
185 In secret joy and hope those dreadful words
But dare not speak them.

PROMETHEUS

Venerable Mother!
All else who live and suffer take from thee
Some comfort; flowers and fruits and happy sounds

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And love, though fleeting; these may not be mine.
190 But mine own words, I pray, deny me not.

THE EARTH

They shall be told.—Ere Babylon was dust,
The Magus Zoroaster,³ my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
195 For know there are two worlds of life and death:
One that which thou beholdest, but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows of all forms that think and live
Till death unite them, and they part no more;
200 Dreams and the light imaginings of men
And all that faith creates, or love desires,
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.
There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade
'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains; all the Gods
205 Are there, and all the Powers of nameless worlds,
Vast, sceptred Phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;
And Demogorgon,⁴ a tremendous Gloom;
And he, the Supreme Tyrant,⁵ on his throne
Of burning Gold. Son, one of these shall utter
210 The curse which all remember. Call at will
Thine own ghost, or the ghost of Jupiter,
Hades or Typhon,⁶ or what mightier Gods
From all-prolific Evil, since thy ruin
Have sprung, and trampled on my prostrate sons.—
215 Ask and they must reply—so the revenge
Of the Supreme may sweep through vacant shades
As rainy wind through the abandoned gate
Of a fallen palace.

PROMETHEUS

Mother, let not aught
Of that which may be evil, pass again
220 My lips, or those of aught resembling me.—
Phantasm of Jupiter, arise, appear!

IONE

My wings are folded o'er mine ears,
My wings are crossed over mine eyes,

3. Zoroaster founded in ancient Persia a dualistic religion that worshiped fire and light in opposition to the evil principle of darkness. Priests of the religion were called Magi (singular: Magus).

4. In a note to the name in a poem published in 1817, Thomas Love Peacock alludes to Milton's mention of Demogorgon (*Paradise Lost*, 2.965) and explains: "He was the Genius of the Earth, and the Sovereign Power of the Terrestrial Daemons. He dwelt originally with Eternity and Chaos, till, becoming weary of inaction, he organised the cha-

otic elements, and surrounded the earth with the heavens. In addition to Pan and the Fates, his children were Uranus, Titaea, Pytho, Eris, and Erebus." Thus, in Peacock's account, Demogorgon is the father of the Sky, the Earth, and the Underworld, as well as the Fates.

5. The shade or simulacrum of Jupiter.

6. Hades (Pluto), king of the underworld; Typhon, a hundred-headed giant, imprisoned beneath volcanic Mount Aetna.

Yet through their silver shade appears
And through their lulling plumes arise
A Shape, a throng of sounds:
May it be, no ill to thee⁷
O thou of many wounds!
Near whom for our sweet sister's sake
Ever thus we watch and wake.

PANTHEA

The sound is of whirlwind underground,
Earthquake and fire, and mountains cloven, –
The Shape is awful like the sound,
Clothed in dark purple, star-inwoven.
A sceptre of pale gold
To stay steps proud, o'er the slow cloud
His veined hand doth hold.
Cruel he looks but calm and strong
Like one who does, not suffers wrong.

PHANTASM OF JUPITER

Why have the secret powers of this strange world
Driven me, a frail and empty phantom, hither
On direst storms? What unaccustomed sounds
Are hovering on my lips, unlike the voice
With which our pallid race hold ghastly talk
In darkness? And, proud Sufferer, who art thou?

PROMETHEUS

Tremendous Image! as thou art must be
He whom thou shadowest forth. I am his foe
The Titan. Speak the words which I would hear,
Although no thought inform thine empty voice.

THE EARTH

Listen! and though your echoes must be mute,
Grey mountains and old woods and haunted springs,
Prophetic caves and isle-surrounding streams
Rejoice to hear what yet ye cannot speak.

PHANTASM

A spirit seizes me, and speaks within:
It tears me as fire tears a thunder-cloud!

PANTHEA

See how he lifts his mighty looks, the Heaven
Darkens above.

IONE

He speaks! O shelter me –

7. Shelley uses the comma in the middle of lines like these to emphasize the internal rhymes.

PROMETHEUS

I see the curse on gestures proud and cold,
And looks of firm defiance, and calm hate,
260 And such despair as mocks itself with smiles,
Written as on a scroll. . . yet speak—O speak!

PHANTASM

Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind,
All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;
Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Humankind,
265 One only being shalt thou not subdue.
Rain then thy plagues upon me here,
Ghastly disease and frenzying fear;
And let alternate frost and fire
Eat into me, and be thine ire
270 Lightning and cutting hail and legioned forms
Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms.

Aye, do thy worst. Thou art Omnipotent.
O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power,
And my own will. Be thy swift mischiefs sent
275 To blast mankind, from yon ethereal tower.
Let thy malignant spirit move
Its darkness over those I love:
On me and mine I imprecate"
The utmost torture of thy hate
280 And thus devote to sleepless agony
This undeclining head while thou must reign on high.

call down

But thou who art the God and Lord—O thou
Who fillest with thy soul this world of woe,
To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow
285 In fear and worship—all-prevailing foe!
I curse thee! let a sufferer's curse
Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse,
Till thine Infinity shall be
A robe of envenomed agony;⁸
290 And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain
To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain.

Heap on thy soul by virtue of this Curse
Ill deeds, then be thou damned, beholding good,
Both infinite as is the Universe,
295 And thou, and thy self-torturing solitude.
An awful Image of calm power
Though now thou sittest, let the hour
Come, when thou must appear to be

8. Like the poisoned shirt of the centaur Nessus, which consumed Hercules' flesh when he put it on. The next two lines allude to the mock crowning of Christ with a crown of thorns.

That which thou art internally.
300 And after many a false and fruitless crime
Scorn track thy lagging fall through boundless space and time.
[The Phantasm vanishes.]

PROMETHEUS Were these my words, O Parent?

THE EARTH They were thine.

PROMETHEUS It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;
Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.

305 I wish no living thing to suffer pain.

THE EARTH

Misery, O misery to me,
That Jove at length should vanquish thee.
Wail, howl aloud, Land and Sea,
The Earth's rent heart shall answer ye.
310 Howl, Spirits of the living and the dead,
Your refuge, your defence lies fallen and vanquished.

FIRST ECHO

Lies fallen and vanquished?

SECOND ECHO

Fallen and vanquished!

IONE

315 Fear not—'tis but some passing spasm,
The Titan is unvanquished still.
But see, where through the azure chasm
Of yon forked and snowy hill,
Trampling the slant winds on high
With golden-sandalled feet, that glow
320 Under plumes of purple dye
Like rose-ensanguined⁹ ivory,
A Shape comes now,
Stretching on high from his right hand
A serpent-cinctured¹ wand.

PANTHEA

325 'Tis Jove's world-wandering Herald, Mercury.

IONE

And who are those with hydra tresses²
And iron wings that climb the wind,
Whom the frowning God represses
Like vapours steaming up behind,
330 Clanging loud, an endless crowd—

9. Stained blood color.

1. Mercury carries a caduceus, a staff encircled by two snakes with their heads facing each other, a symbol of peace befitting the role of Hermes/Mer-

cury as the messenger of the Gods.

2. Locks of hair resembling the many-headed snake, the hydra,

788 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

PANTHEA

These are Jove's tempest-walking hounds,³
Whom he gluts with groans and blood,
When charioted on sulphurous cloud
He bursts Heaven's bounds.

IONE

Are they now led, from the thin dead
On new pangs to be fed?

PANTHEA

The Titan looks as ever, firm, not proud.

FIRST FURY

Ha! I scent life!

SECOND FURY

Let me but look into his eyes!

THIRD FURY

The hope of torturing him smells like a heap
Of corpses to a death-bird after battle!

FIRST FURY

Darest thou delay, O Herald! take cheer, Hounds
Of Hell – what if the Son of Maia⁴ soon
Should make us food and sport? Who can please long
The Omnipotent?

Mercury

MERCURY

Back to your towers of iron
And gnash, beside the streams of fire, and wail
Your foodless teeth! . . . Geryon, arise! and Gorgon,
Chimaera,⁴ and thou Sphinx, subtlest of fiends,
Who ministered to Thebes Heaven's poisoned wine,
Unnatural love and more unnatural hate:⁵
These shall perform your task.

FIRST FURY

O mercy! mercy!

We die with our desire – drive us not back!

3. I.e., the Furies, avengers of crimes committed against the gods.

4. Geryon, a monster with three heads and three bodies; the Gorgons, three mythical personages, with snakes for hair, who turned beholders into stone; the Chimera, a fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology with three heads (lion, goat, and dragon), the body of a lion and a goat,

and a dragon's tail.

5. The Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion, wings, and the face and breasts of a woman, besieged Thebes by devouring those who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle (causing the Sphinx to kill herself), only to marry his mother ("unnatural love"), leading to the tragic events depicted in the Greek Theban plays.

MERCURY

Crouch then in silence.—

Awful⁰ Sufferer!

awe-inspiring

To thee unwilling, most unwillingly

I come, by the great Father's will driven down

355 To execute a doom of new revenge.

Alas! I pity thee, and hate myself

That I can do no more.—Aye from thy sight

Returning, for a season, Heaven seems Hell,

So thy worn form pursues me night and day,

360 Smiling reproach. Wise art thou, firm and good,

But vainly wouldst stand forth alone in strife

Against the Omnipotent, as yon clear lamps

That measure and divide the weary years

From which there is no refuge, long have taught

365 And long must teach.—Even now thy Torturer arms

With the strange might of unimagined pains

The powers who scheme slow agonies in Hell,

And my commission is, to lead them here,

Or what more subtle,⁰ foul or savage

fiends

artful

370 People⁰ the abyss, and leave them to their task.

populate

Be it not so! . . . There is a secret known

To thee and to none else of living things

Which may transfer the sceptre of wide Heaven,

The fear of which perplexes the Supreme . . .

375 Clothe it in words, and bid it clasp his throne

In intercession; bend thy soul in prayer

And like a suppliant in some gorgeous fane⁰

temple

Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart;

For benefits and meek submission tame

The fiercest and the mightiest.

PROMETHEUS

380 Evil minds

Change good to their own nature. I gave all

He has; and in return he chains me here

Years, ages, night and day: whether the Sun

Split my parched skin, or in the moony night

385 The chrystal-winged snow cling round my hair—

Whilst my beloved race is trampled down

By his thought-executing ministers.

Such is the tyrant's recompense—'tis just:

He who is evil can receive no good;

390 And for a world bestowed, or a friend lost,

He can feel hate, fear, shame—not gratitude:

He but requites me for his own misdeed.

Kindness to such is keen reproach, which breaks

With bitter stings the light sleep of Revenge.

395 Submission, thou dost know, I cannot try:

For what submission but that fatal word,

The death-seal of mankind's captivity—

790 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Like the Sicilian's hair-suspended sword⁶
Which trembles o'er his crown—would he accept,
400 Or could I yield?—which yet I will not yield.
Let others flatter Crime where it sits throned
In brief Omnipotence; secure are they:
For Justice when triumphant will weep down
Pity not punishment on her own wrongs,
405 Too much avenged by those who err. I wait,
Enduring thus the retributive hour⁷
Which since we spake is even nearer now.—•
But hark, the hell-hounds clamour. Fear delay!
Behold! Heaven lowers⁸ under thy Father's frown. *cowers*

MERCURY
410 O that we might be spared—I to inflict
And thou to suffer! Once more answer me:
Thou knowest not the period⁸ of Jove's power?

PROMETHEUS
I know but this, that it must come.

MERCURY
Alas!
Thou canst not count thy years to come of pain?

PROMETHEUS
415 They last while Jove must reign, nor more nor less
Do I desire or fear.

MERCURY
Yet pause, and plunge
Into Eternity, where recorded time,
Even all that we imagine, age on age,
Seems but a point, and the reluctant mind
420 Flags wearily in its unending flight
Till it sink, dizzy, blind, lost, shelterless;
Perchance it has not numbered the slow years
Which thou must spend in torture, unreprieved.

PROMETHEUS
Perchance no thought can count them—yet they pass.

MERCURY
425 If thou might'st dwell among the Gods the while
Lapped in voluptuous joy?—

6. I.e., the sword of Damocles, suspended by a thread above the throne of Damocles, ruler of Syracuse in Sicily.

7. Time of retribution,
8. The end or conclusion,

PROMETHEUS

I would not quit
This bleak ravine, these unrepentant pains.

MERCURY

Alas! I wonder at, yet pity thee.

PROMETHEUS

430 Pity the self-despising slaves of Heaven,
Not me, within whose mind sits peace serene
As light in the sun, throned. . . . How vain is talk!
Call up the fiends.

IONE

O sister, look! White fire
Has cloven to the roots yon huge snow-loaded Cedar;
How fearfully God's thunder howls behind!

MERCURY

435 I must obey his words and thine – alas!
Most heavily remorse hangs at my heart!

PANTHEA

See where the child of Heaven with winged feet
Runs down the slanted sunlight of the dawn.

IONE

440 Dear sister, close thy plumes over thine eyes
Lest thou behold and die – they come, they come
Blackening the birth of day with countless wings,
And hollow underneath, like death.

FIRST FURY

Prometheus!

SECOND FURY

Immortal Titan!

THIRD FURY

Champion of Heaven's slaves!

PROMETHEUS

445 He whom some dreadful voice invokes is here,
Prometheus, the chained Titan. – Horrible forms,
What and who are ye? Never yet there came
Phantasms⁰ so foul through monster-teeming Hell
From the all-miscreative brain of Jove;
Whilst I behold such execrable shapes,
450 Methinks I grow like what I contemplate
And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy.

apparitions

792 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

FIRST FURY

We are the ministers of pain and fear
And disappointment and mistrust and hate
And clinging⁰ crime; and as lean dogs pursue
455 Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing fawn,
We track all things that weep and bleed and live
When the great King betrays them to our will.

clasping

PROMETHEUS

0 many fearful natures in one name!
1 know ye, and these lakes and echoes know
460 The darkness and the clangour of your wings.
But why more hideous than your loathed selves
Gather ye up in legions from the deep?

SECOND FURY

We knew not that—Sisters, rejoice, rejoice!

PROMETHEUS

Can aught exult in its deformity?

SECOND FURY

The beauty of delight makes lovers glad
Gazing on one another—so are we.
As from the rose which the pale priestess kneels
To gather for her festal⁰ crown of flowers
The aerial crimson falls, flushing her cheek—
So from our victim's destined agony
The shade which is our form invests us round,
Else we are shapeless as our Mother Night.

festive

PROMETHEUS

I laugh⁰ your power and his who sent you here
To lowest scorn.—Pour forth the cup of pain.

mock

FIRST FURY

475 Thou thinkest we will rend thee bone from bone?
And nerve from nerve, working like fire within?

PROMETHEUS

Pain is my element as hate is thine;
Ye rend me now: I care not.

SECOND FURY

Dost imagine
We will but laugh into thy lidless eyes?

PROMETHEUS

480 I weigh⁰ not what ye do, but what ye suffer
Being evil. Cruel was the Power which called
You, or aught else so wretched, into light.

consider

THIRD FURY

Thou think'st we will live through thee, one by one,
Like animal life, and though we can obscure not
485 The soul which burns within, that we will dwell
Beside it, like a vain loud multitude
Vexing the self-content of wisest men –
That we will be dread thought beneath thy brain
And foul desire round thine astonished heart
490 And blood within thy labyrinthine veins
Crawling like agony.

PROMETHEUS

Why, ye are thus now;
Yet am I king over myself, and rule
The torturing and conflicting throngs within
As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous.

CHORUS OF FURIES

495 From the ends of the Earth, from the ends of the Earth,
Where the night has its grave and the morning its birth,
Come, Come, Come!
O yet who shake hills with the scream of your mirth
When cities sink howling in ruin, and ye
500 Who with wingless footsteps trample the Sea,
And close upon Shipwreck and Famine's track
Sit chattering with joy on the foodless wrack;
Come, Come, Come!
Leave the bed, low, cold and red,
505 Strewed beneath a nation dead;
Leave the hatred – as in ashes
Fire is left for future burning, –
It will burst in bloodier flashes
When ye stir it, soon returning;
510 Leave the self-contempt implanted
In young spirits sense-enchanted,
Misery's yet unkindled fuel;
Leave Hell's secrets half-enchanted
To the maniac dreamer: cruel
515 More than ye can be with hate,
Is he with fear.
Come, Come, Come!
We are steaming up from Hell's wide gate
And we burthen the blasts of the atmosphere,
520 But vainly we toil till ye come here.

IONE

Sister, I hear the thunder of new wings.

PANTHEA

These solid mountains quiver with the sound
Even as the tremulous air: – their shadows make
The space within my plumes more black than night.

794 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

FIRST FURY

Your call was as a winged car
Driven on whirlwinds fast and far;

It rapt^o us from red gulphs of war – *carried*

From wide cities, ^{SECOND FURY} ~~famine-wasted~~ –

THIRD FURY

Groans half heard, and blood untasted –

FOURTH FURY

Kingly conclaves, stern and cold,
Where blood with gold is bought and sold –

FIFTH FURY

From the furnace, white and hot,
In which –

A FURY

535 Speak not – whisper not!
I know all that ye would tell,
But to speak might break the spell
Which must bend the Invincible,
The stern of thought;
He yet defies the deepest power of Hell.

A FURY

Tear the veil! –

ANOTHER FURY

It is torn!

CHORUS

540 The pale stars of the morn
Shine on a misery dire to be borne.
Dost thou faint, mighty Titan? We laugh thee to scorn.
Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou waken'dst for man?
Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran
Those perishing waters: a thirst of fierce fever,
545 Hope, love, doubt, desire – which consume him forever.
 One^o came forth, of gentle worth, *Christ*
 Smiling on the sanguine earth;
 His words outlived him, like swift poison
 Withering up truth, peace and pity.
550 Look! where round the wide horizon
 Many a million-peopled city
 Vomits smoke in the bright air. –
 Hark that outcry of despair!
 'Tis his mild and gentle ghost
555 Wailing for the faith he kindled.

Look again,—the flames almost
To a glow-worm's lamp have dwindled:
The survivors round the embers
Gather in dread.
560 Joy, Joy, Joy!
Past ages crowd on thee, but each one remembers,
And the future is dark, and the present is spread
Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head.

SEMICHORUS I
565 Drops of bloody agony flow
From his white and quivering brow.
Grant a little respite now—
See! a disenchanting Nation⁹
Springs like day from desolation;
To truth its state, is dedicate,
570 And Freedom leads it forth, her mate;
A legioned band of linked brothers
Whom Love calls children—

SEMICHORUS II
'Tis another's—
See how kindred murder kin!
Tis the vintage-time for Death and Sin:
575 Blood, like new wine, bubbles within
Till Despair smothers
The struggling World—which slaves and tyrants win.
[All the Furies vanish, except one.]

IONE
580 Hark, sister! what a low yet dreadful groan
Quite unsuppressed is tearing up the heart
Of the good Titan—as storms tear the deep
And beasts hear the Sea moan in inland caves.
Darest thou observe how the fiends torture him?

PANTHEA
Alas, I looked forth twice, but will no more.

IONE
What didst thou see?

PANTHEA
A woeful sight—a youth⁰
With patient looks nailed to a crucifix.

Christ

IONE
What next?

9. Usually identified as France, breaking the spell of monarchy at the time of the Revolution.

PANTHEA

The Heaven around, the Earth below
Was peopled with thick shapes of human death,
All horrible, and wrought by human hands,
And some appeared the work of human hearts,
590 For men were slowly killed by frowns and smiles:
And other sights too foul to speak and live
Were wandering by. Let us not tempt worse fear
By looking forth—those groans are grief enough.

FURY Behold, an emblem—those who do endure
595 Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but heap
Thousand-fold torment on themselves and him.

PROMETHEUS Bemit the anguish of that lighted stare—
Close those wan lips—let that thorn-wounded brow
Stream not with blood—it mingles with thy tears
600 Fix, fix those tortured orbs in peace and death
So thy sick throes shake not that crucifix,
So those pale fingers play not with thy gore.—
O horrible! Thy name I will not speak,
It hath become a curse.¹ I see, I see

605 The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just,
Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee,
Some hunted by foul lies from their heart's home,
An early-chosen, late-lamented home,
As hooded ounces² cling to the driven hind,"

610 Some linked to corpses in unwholesome cells:
Some—hear I not the multitude laugh loud?—
Impaled in lingering fire: and mighty realms
Float by my feet like sea-uprooted isles
Whose sons are kneaded down in common blood
615 By the red light of their own burning homes.

FURY Blood thou canst see, and fire; and canst hear groans;
Worse things, unheard, unseen, remain behind.

PROMETHEUS Worse?

FURY In each human heart terror survives
The ravin it has gorged:³ the loftiest fear
620 All that they would disdain to think were true:
Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
The fanes⁰ of many a worship, now outworn.
They dare not devise good for man's estate
And yet they know not that they do not dare.
625 The good want power, but to weep barren tears.⁴
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

doe

temples

1. I.e., the name "Christ" has become, literally, a curse word, and metaphorically, a curse to humankind, in that His religion of love is used to justify religious wars and bloody oppression.
2. Cheetahs, or leopards, used in hunting (hoods

were sometimes placed over their eyes to make them easier to control).
3. The prey that it has greedily devoured.
4. I.e., the good lack ("want") power except to weep "barren tears."

Many are strong and rich,—and would be just,—
630 But live among their suffering fellow men
As if none felt: they know not what they do.⁵
PROMETHEUS Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes
And yet, I pity those they torture not.
FURY Thou pitiest them? I speak no more! *[Vanishes.]*
PROMETHEUS Ah woe!
635 Ah woe! Alas! pain, pain ever, forever!
I close my tearless eyes, but see more clear
Thy works within my woe-illumed mind,
Thou subtle Tyrant!⁶ . . . Peace is in the grave—
The grave hides all things beautiful and good—
640 I am a God and cannot find it there,
Nor would I seek it: for, though dread revenge,
This is defeat, fierce King, not victory.
The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul
With new endurance, till the hour arrives
645 When they shall be no types of things which are.
PANTHEA Alas! what sawest thou?
PROMETHEUS There are two woes:
To speak and to behold; thou spare me one.⁷
Names are there, Nature's sacred watchwords—they
Were borne aloft in bright emblazonry.⁸
650 The nations thronged around, and cried aloud
As with one voice, "Truth, liberty and love!"
Suddenly fierce confusion fell from Heaven
Among them—there was strife, deceit and fear;
Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil.
655 This was the shadow of the truth I saw.
THE EARTH I felt thy torture, Son, with such mixed joy
As pain and Virtue give.—To cheer thy state
I bid ascend those subtle and fair spirits
Whose homes are the dim caves of human thought
660 And who inhabit, as birds wing the wind,
Its world-surrounding ether;⁹ they behold
Beyond that twilight realm, as in a glass,⁰ *mirror*
The future—may they speak comfort to thee!

PANTHEA
665 Look, Sister, where a troop of spirits gather
Like flocks of clouds in spring's delightful weather,
Thronging in the blue air!

IONE
And see! more come
Like fountain-vapours when the winds are dumb,

5. The Fury ironically echoes Christ's plea for forgiveness of his crucifiers: "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do" (Luke 23.34).
6. Jupiter (also addressed as "fierce King," line 642).

7. I.e., spare me the woe of speaking (about what I have beheld).
8. As in a brilliant display of banners.
9. A medium, weightless and infinitely elastic, once supposed to permeate the universe.

840 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

That climb up the ravine in scattered lines.
And hark! is it the music of the pines?
Is it the lake? is it the waterfall?

PANTHEA

Tis something sadder, sweeter far than all.

CHORUS OF SPIRITS¹

From unremembered ages we
Gentle guides and guardians be
Of Heaven-oppressed mortality –
And we breathe, and sicken not,
The atmosphere of human thought:
Be it dim and dank and grey
Like a storm-extinguished day
Travelled o'er by dying gleams;
Be it bright as all between
Cloudless skies and windless streams,
Silent, liquid and serene –
As the birds within the wind,
As the fish within the wave,
As the thoughts of man's own mind
Float through all above the grave,
We make there, our liquid lair,
Voyaging cloudlike and unpent⁰
Through the boundless element –
Thence we bear the prophecy
Which begins and ends in thee!

IONE

More yet come, one by one: the air around them
Looks radiant as the air around a star.

FIRST SPIRIT

On a battle-trumpet's blast
I fled hither, fast, fast, fast,
Mid the darkness upward cast –
From the dust of creeds outworn,
From the tyrant's banner torn,
Gathering round me, onward borne,
There was mingled many a cry –
Freedom! Hope! Death! Victory!
Till they faded through the sky
And one sound – above, around,
One sound beneath, around, above,
Was moving; 'twas the soul of love;
'Twas the hope, the prophecy,
Which begins and ends in thee.

1. Identified by Earth at lines 658-63.

SECOND SPIRIT

710 A rainbow's arch stood on the sea,
Which rocked beneath, immoveably;
And the triumphant Storm did flee,
Like a conqueror swift and proud
Between, with many a captive cloud
A shapeless, dark and rapid crowd,
Each by lightning riven in half. –
715 I heard the thunder hoarsely laugh. –
Mighty fleets were strewn like chaff
And spread beneath, a hell of death
O'er the white waters. I alit
720 On a great ship lightning-split
And speeded hither on the sigh
Of one who gave an enemy
His plank – then plunged aside to die.

THIRD SPIRIT

725 I sate beside a sage's bed
And the lamp was burning red
Near the book where he had fed,
When a Dream with plumes of flame
To his pillow hovering came,
And I knew it was the same
Which had kindled long ago
730 Pity, eloquence and woe;
And the world awhile below
Wore the shade its lustre made.
It has borne me here as fleet
As Desire's lightning feet:
735 I must ride it back ere morrow,
Or the sage will wake in sorrow.

FOURTH SPIRIT

On a Poet's lips I slept
Dreaming like a love-adept
In the sound his breathing kept;
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses
But feeds on the aerial kisses
Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.
He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees i' the ivy-bloom
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings^o of immortality! –
One of these awakened me
And I sped to succour thee.

children

800 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

IONE

Behold'st thou not two shapes from the East and West
Come, as two doves to one beloved nest,
Twin nurslings of the all-sustaining air,
75 On swift still wings glide down the atmosphere?
And hark! their sweet, sad voices! 'tis despair
Mingled with love, and then dissolved in sound.—

PANTHEA

Canst thou speak, sister? all my words are drowned.

IONE

70 Their beauty gives me voice. See how they float
On their sustaining wings of skiey grain,
Orange and azure, deepening into gold:
Their soft smiles light the air like a star's fire.

CHORUS OF SPIRITS

Hast thou beheld the form of Love?

FIFTH SPIRIT

As over wide dominions
I sped, like some swift cloud that wings the wide air's wildernesses.
75 That planet-crested Shape swept by on lightning-braided
pinions,⁰ *wings*
Scattering the liquid joy of life from his ambrosial⁰ tresses: *heavenly*
His footsteps paved the world with light—but as I past 'twas fading
And hollow Ruin yawned behind. Great Sages bound in madness
And headless patriots and pale youths who perished unupbraiding,-
770 Gleamed in the Night I wandered o'er—till thou, O King of sadness,
Turned by thy smile the worst I saw to recollected gladness.

SIXTH SPIRIT

Ah, sister! Desolation is a delicate thing:
It walks not on the Earth, it floats not on the air,
But treads with silent footstep, and fans with silent wing
75 The tender hopes which in their hearts the best and gentlest bear,
Who, soothed to false repose by the fanning plumes above
And the music-stirring motion of its soft and busy feet,
Dreams visions of aerial joy, and call the monster, Love,
And wake, and find the shadow Pain—as he whom now we greet.

CHORUS

780 Though Ruin now Love's shadow be,
Following him destroyingly
On Death's white and winged steed,
Which the fleetest cannot flee—
Trampling down both flower and weed,
785 Man and beast and foul and fair,

2. Without uttering reproaches.

Like a tempest through the air;
Thou shalt quell this Horseman grim,
Woundless though in heart or limb. –

PROMETHEUS

Spirits! how know ye this shall be?

CHORUS

790 In the atmosphere we breathe –
As buds grow red when snow-storms flee
From spring gathering up beneath,
Whose mild winds shake, the elder brake⁰ *thicket*
And the wandering herdsmen know
795 That the white-thorn soon will blow –
Wisdom, Justice, Love and Peace,
When they struggle to increase,
Are to us as soft winds be
To shepherd-boys – the prophecy
800 Which begins and ends in thee.

IONE

Where are the Spirits fled?

PANTHEA

Only a sense
Remains of them, like the Omnipotence
Of music when the inspired voice and lute
Languish, ere yet the responses are mute
805 Which through the deep and labyrinthine soul,
Like echoes through long caverns, wind and roll.

PROMETHEUS

How fair these air-born shapes! and yet I feel
Most vain all hope but love, and thou art far,
Asia! who when my being overflowed
810 Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine
Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust.
All things are still – alas! how heavily
This quiet morning weighs upon my heart;
Though I should dream, I could even sleep with grief
815 If slumber were denied not . . . I would fain
Be what it is my destiny to be,
The saviour and the strength of suffering man,
Or sink into the original gulph of things. . . .
There is no agony and no solace left;
820 Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.

PANTHEA

Hast thou forgotten one who watches thee
The cold dark night, and never sleeps but when
The shadow of thy spirit falls on her?

802 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

PROMETHEUS

I said all hope was vain but love—thou lovest . . .

PANTHEA

Deeply in truth—but the Eastern star looks white,
And Asia waits in that far Indian vale,
The scene of her sad exile—rugged once
And desolate and frozen like this ravine;
But now invested with fair flowers and herbs
And haunted by sweet airs and sounds, which flow
Among the woods and waters, from the ether" *purser air*
Of her transforming presence—which would fade
If it were mingled not with thine.—Farewell!

From *Act 2*

SCENE 4—*The Cave of DEMOGORGON*. ASIA AND PANTHEA.³

PANTHEA What veiled form sits on that ebon throne?

ASIA The veil has fallen! . . .

PANTHEA I see a mighty Darkness

Filling the seat of power; and rays of gloom
Dart round, as light from the meridian Sun,
Ungazed upon and shapeless—neither limb
Nor form—nor outline;⁴ yet we feel it is
A living Spirit.

DEMOGORGON Ask what thou wouldst know.

ASIA What canst thou tell?

DEMOGORGON All things thou dar'st demand.

ASIA Who made the living world?

DEMOGORGON God.

ASIA Who made all

That it contains—thought, passion, reason, will,
Imagination?

DEMOGORGON God, Almighty God.

ASIA Who made that sense⁵ which, when the winds of Spring

In rarest visitation, or the voice
Of one beloved heard in youth alone,
Fills the faint eyes with falling tears, which dim
The radiant looks of unbewailing flowers,
And leaves this peopled earth a solitude
When it returns no more?

3. Act 2 has opened with Asia—the feminine principle and embodiment of love, who was separated from Prometheus at the moment of his fall into divisive hate—in a lovely Indian valley at the first hour of the dawn of the spring season of redemption. Asia and her sister Panthea have been led, by a sweet and irresistible compulsion, first to the portal and then down into the depths of the cave of Demogorgon—the central enigma of Shelley's poem.

As the father of all that exists, Demogorgon may represent the ultimate reason for the way things

are. As such, Shelley appears to argue, Demogorgon must be a mystery inaccessible to knowledge and must be ignorant of the principle controlling him. In this scene Demogorgon can give only riddling answers to Asia's questions about the "why" of creation, good, and evil.

4. Echoing Milton's description of Death, *Paradise Lost* 2.666-73.

5. Presumably the sense by which one is aware of the "unseen Power" that Shelley calls "Intellectual Beauty" (see "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," stanza 2, p. 766).

DEMOGORGON Merciful God.
ASIA And who made terror, madness, crime, remorse,
Which from the links of the great chain of things
To every thought within the mind of man
Sway and drag heavily—and each one reels
Under the load towards the pit of death;
Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;
And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood;
Pain whose unheeded and familiar speech
Is howling and keen shrieks, day after day;
And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell?⁶
DEMOGORGON He reigns.
ASIA Utter his name—a world pining in pain
Asks but his name; curses shall drag him down.
DEMOGORGON He reigns.
ASIA I feel, I know it— who?
DEMOGORGON He reigns.
ASIA Who reigns? There was the Heaven and Earth at first
And Light and Love;—then Saturn,⁷ from whose throne
Time fell, an envious shadow; such the state
Of the earth's primal spirits beneath his sway
As the calm joy of flowers and living leaves
Before the wind or sun has withered them
And semivital worms; but he refused
The birthright of their being, knowledge, power,
The skill which wields the elements, the thought
Which pierces this dim Universe like light,
Self-empire and the majesty of love,
For thirst of which they fainted. Then Prometheus
Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter
And with this law alone: "Let man be free,"
Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven.
To know nor faith nor love nor law, to be
Omnipotent but friendless, is to reign;
And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man
First famine, and then toil, and then disease,
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,
Fell; and the unseasonable seasons drove,
With alternating shafts of frost and fire,
Their shelterless, pale tribes to mountain caves;
And in their desert⁹ hearts fierce wants he sent
And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,
So ruining the lair wherein they raged.
Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth,⁸ fadeless blooms;

empty

6. The nouns "hope," "love," etc. (lines 24–28) are all objects of the verb "made" (line 19).

7. In Greek myth Saturn's reign was the golden age. In Shelley's version Saturn refused to grant mortals knowledge and science, so that it was an age of ignorant innocence in which the deepest

human needs remained unfulfilled.

8. These are medicinal drugs and flowers in Greek myth. Asia is describing (lines 59–97) the various sciences and arts given to humans by Prometheus, the culture bringer.

That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
65 Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;
And he tamed fire which, like some beast of prey,
Most terrible, but lovely, played beneath
The frown of man, and tortured to his will
Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power,
70 And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms,
Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.
He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the Universe;
And Science struck the thrones of Earth and Heaven
75 Which shook, but fell not; and the harmonious mind
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song,
And music lifted up the listening spirit
Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,
Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound;
80 And human hands first mimicked and then mocked⁹
With moulded limbs more lovely than its own
The human form, till marble grew divine,
And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see
Reflected in their race, behold, and perish.¹ –
85 He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,
And Disease drank and slept – Death grew like sleep. –
He taught the implicated⁰ orbits woven *intertwined*
Of the wide-wandering stars, and how the Sun
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell
90 The pale moon is transformed, when her broad eye
Gazes not on the interlunar² sea;
He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs,
The tempest-winged chariots of the Ocean,
And the Celt knew the Indian.³ Cities then
95 Were built, and through their snow-like columns flowed
The warm winds, and the azure aether shone,
And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen . . .
Such the alleviations of his state
Prometheus gave to man – for which he hangs
100 Withering in destined pain – but who rains down
Evil, the immedicable plague, which while
Man looks on his creation like a God
And sees that it is glorious, drives him on,
The wreck of his own will, the scorn of Earth,
105 The outcast, the abandoned, the alone? –
Not Jove: while yet his frown shook Heaven, aye when
His adversary from adamant⁰ chains *unbreakable*

9. I.e., sculptors first merely reproduced but later improved on and heightened the beauty of the human form, so that the original was inferior to, and hence "mocked" by, the copy.

1. Expectant mothers looked at the beautiful statues so that their children might, by prenatal influence, be born with the beauty that makes

beholders die of love.

2. The phase between old and new moons, when the moon is invisible.

3. The reference is to the ships in which the Celtic (here, non-Greco-Roman) races of Europe were able to sail to India.

Cursed him, he trembled like a slave. Declare
Who is his master? Is he too a slave?

110 DEMOGORGON All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil:
Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no.

ASIA Whom calledst thou God?

DEMOGORGON I spoke but as ye speak—
For Jove is the supreme of living things.

ASIA Who is the master of the slave?

DEMOGORGON —If the Abyss
115 Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? what to bid speak
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these

120 All things are subject but eternal Love.

ASIA So much I asked before, and my heart gave
The response thou hast given; and of such truths
Each to itself must be the oracle.—
One more demand . . . and do thou answer me

125 As my own soul would answer, did it know
That which I ask.—Prometheus shall arise
Henceforth the Sun of this rejoicing world:
When shall the destined hour arrive?

DEMOGORGON Behold!⁴

ASIA The rocks are cloven, and through the purple night
130 I see Cars drawn by rainbow-winged steeds
Which trample the dim winds—in each there stands
A wild-eyed charioteer, urging their flight.
Some look behind, as fiends pursued them there
And yet I see no shapes but the keen stars:

135 Others with burning eyes lean forth, and drink
With eager lips the wind of their own speed,
As if the thing they loved fled on before,
And now—even now they clasped it; their bright locks
Stream like a comet's flashing hair: they all
Sweep onward.—

140 DEMOGORGON These are the immortal Hours
Of whom thou didst demand.—One waits for thee.

ASIA A Spirit with a dreadful countenance
Checks its dark chariot by the craggy gulph.
Unlike thy brethren, ghastly charioteer,

145 What art thou? whither wouldst thou bear me? Speak!

SPIRIT I am the shadow of a destiny
More dread than is my aspect—ere yon planet
Has set, the Darkness which ascends with me
Shall wrap in lasting night Heaven's kingless throne.

ASIA What meanest thou?

150 PANTHEA That terrible shadow⁵ floats
Up from its throne, as may the lurid⁰ smoke *red-glaring*

4. Demogorgon's answer is a gesture: he points to the approaching chariots ("Cars").

5. Demogorgon (the "Darkness" of line 148), who is ascending (lines 150–55) to dethrone Jupiter.

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Of earthquake-ruined cities o'er the sea.—
Lo! it ascends the Car . . . the coursers fly
Terrified; watch its path among the stars
Blackening the night!

155 ASIA Thus I am answered—strange!

PANTHEA See, near the verge⁰ another chariot stays;
An ivory shell inlaid with crimson fire
Which comes and goes within its sculptured rim
Of delicate strange tracery—the young Spirit
160 That guides it, has the dovelike eyes of hope.
How its soft smiles attract the soul!—as light
Lures winged insects⁶ through the lampless air.

horizon

SPIRIT

My coursers are fed with the lightning,
They drink of the whirlwind's stream
165 And when the red morning is brightning
They bathe in the fresh sunbeam;
They have strength for their swiftness, I deem:
Then ascend with me, daughter of Ocean.

I desire—and their speed makes night kindle;
170 I fear—they outstrip the Typhoon;
Ere the cloud piled on Atlas⁷ can dwindle
We encircle the earth and the moon:
We shall rest from long labours at noon:
Then ascend with me, daughter of Ocean.

SCENE 5—*The Car -pauses within a Cloud on the Top of a snowy Mountain, ASIA,
PANTHEA, and the SPIRIT OF THE HOUR.*

SPIRIT

On the brink of the night and the morning
My coursers are wont to respire,⁸
But the Earth has just whispered a warning
That their flight must be swifter than fire:
5 They shall drink the hot speed of desire!

ASIA Thou breathest on their nostrils—but my breath
Would give them swifter speed.

SPIRIT Alas, it could not.

PANTHEA O Spirit! pause and tell whence is the light
Which fills the cloud? the sun is yet unrisen.

io SPIRIT The sun will rise not until noon.⁹—Apollo
Is held in Heaven by wonder—and the light
Which fills this vapour, as the aerial hue
Of fountain-gazing roses fills the water,

6. The ancient image of the soul, or *psyche*, was a moth. The chariot described here will carry Asia to a reunion with Prometheus.

7. A mountain in North Africa that the Greeks

regarded as so high that it supported the heavens,
8. Catch their breath.

9. The time of the reunion of Prometheus and Asia.

Flows from thy mighty sister.

PANTHEA Yes, I feel. . .

ASIA What is it with thee, sister? Thou art pale.

PANTHEA How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;

I feel, but see thee not. I scarce endure

The radiance of thy beauty.¹ Some good change

Is working in the elements which suffer

Thy presence thus unveiled.—The Nereids tell

That on the day when the clear hyaline⁰

glassy sea

Was cloven at thy uprising, and thou didst stand

Within a veined shell,² which floated on

Over the calm floor of the chrystal sea,

Among the /Egean isles, and by the shores

Which bear thy name, love, like the atmosphere

Of the sun's fire filling the living world,

Burst from thee, and illumined Earth and Heaven

And the deep ocean and the sunless caves,

And all that dwells within them; till grief cast

Eclipse upon the soul from which it came:

Such art thou now, nor is it I alone,

Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one,

But the whole world which seeks thy sympathy.

Hearest thou not sounds i' the air which speak the love

Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not

The inanimate winds enamoured of thee?—List!

[Music.]

ASIA Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his

Whose echoes they are—yet all love is sweet,

Given or returned; common as light is love

And its familiar voice wearies not ever.

Like the wide Heaven, the all-sustaining air,

It makes the reptile equal to the God . . .

They who inspire it most are fortunate

As I am now; but those who feel it most

Are happier still, after long sufferings

As I shall soon become.

PANTHEA List! Spirits speak.

VOICE (*in the air, singing*)³

Life of Life! thy lips enkindle

With their love the breath between them

And thy smiles before they dwindle

Make the cold air fire; then screen them

In those looks where whoso gazes

Faints, entangled in their mazes.

1. In an earlier scene Panthea had envisioned in a dream the radiant and eternal inner form of Prometheus emerging through his "wound-worn limbs." The corresponding transfiguration of Asia, prepared for by her descent to the underworld to question Demogorgon, now takes place.

2. The story told by the Nereids (sea nymphs)

serves to associate Asia with Aphrodite, goddess of love, emerging (as in Botticelli's painting) from the Mediterranean on a seashell.

3. The voice attempts to describe, in a dizzying whirl of optical paradoxes, what it feels like to look on the naked essence of love and beauty.

55 Child of Light! thy limbs are burning
Through the vest which seems to hide them
As the radiant lines of morning
Through the clouds ere they divide them,
And this atmosphere divinest
Shrouds thee wheresoe'er thou shinest.

60 Fair are others;—none beholds thee
But thy voice sounds low and tender
Like the fairest, for it folds thee
From the sight, that liquid splendour,
And all feel, yet see thee never
65 As I feel now, lost forever!

Lamp of Earth! where'er thou movest
Its dim shapes are clad with brightness
And the souls of whom thou lovest
Walk upon the winds with lightness
70 Till they fail, as I am failing,
Dizzy, lost . . . yet unbewailing!

ASIA

My soul is an enchanted Boat
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
75 Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing,
And thine doth like an Angel sit
Beside the helm conducting it
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.
It seems to float ever—forever—
Upon that many winding River
80 Between mountains, woods, abysses,
A Paradise of wildernesses,
Till like one in slumber bound
Borne to the Ocean, I float down, around,
Into a Sea profound, of ever-spreading sound.

Meanwhile thy spirit lifts its pinions⁰ *wings*
In Music's most serene dominions,
Catching the winds that fan that happy Heaven.
And we sail on, away, afar,
Without a course—without a star—
90 But by the instinct of sweet Music driven
Till, through Elysian garden islets
By thee, most beautiful of pilots,
Where never mortal pinnace⁰ glided, *small boat*
The boat of my desire is guided—
Bealms where the air we breathe is Love
Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,
Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above.

We have past Age's icy caves,
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves

And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray;
Beyond the glassy gulphs we flee
Of shadow-peopled Infancy,
Through Death and Birth to a diviner day,⁴
A Paradise of vaulted bowers
Lit by downward-gazing flowers
And watery paths that wind between
Wildernesses calm and green,
Peopled by shapes too bright to see,
And rest, having beheld—somewhat like thee,
Which walk upon the sea, and chaunt melodiously!

From *Act* 3

SCENE 1—*Heaven, JUPITER on his Throne; THETIS and the other Deities assembled.*

JUPITER Ye congregated Powers of Heaven who share
The glory and the strength of him ye serve,
Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent.
All else had been subdued to me—alone
The soul of man, like unextinguished fire,
Yet burns towards Heaven with fierce reproach and doubt
And lamentation and reluctant prayer,
Hurling up insurrection, which might make
Our antique empire insecure, though built
On eldest faith, and Hell's coeval,³ fear.
And though my curses through the pendulous⁰ air *overhanging*
Like snow on herbless peaks, fall flake by flake
And cling to it⁶—though under my wrath's night
It climb the crags of life, step after step,
Which wound it, as ice wounds unsandalled feet,
It yet remains supreme o'er misery,
Aspiring . . . unrepressed; yet soon to fall:
Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,
That fatal Child,⁷ the terror of the Earth,
Who waits but till the destined Hour arrive,
Bearing from Demogorgon's vacant throne
The dreadful might of ever living limbs
Which clothed that awful spirit unbeheld—
To redescend, and trample out the spark⁸ . . .

Pour forth Heaven's wine, Idaean Ganymede,
And let it fill the daedal⁹ cups like fire
And from the flower-inwoven soil divine

4. Asia is describing what it feels like to be transfigured—in the image of moving backward in the stream of time, through youth and infancy and birth, in order to die to this life and be born again to a "diviner" existence.

5. Of the same age.

6. "It" (as also in lines 14 and 16) is "the soul of man" (line 5).

7. The son of Jupiter and Thetis. Jupiter believes

that he has begotten a child who will assume the bodily form of the conquered Demogorgon and then return to announce his victory and the defeat of the resistance of Prometheus.

8. Of Prometheus's defiance.

9. Skillfully wrought (from the name of the Greek craftsman Daedalus). Ganymede (line 25) had been seized on Mount Ida by an eagle and carried to heaven to be Jupiter's cupbearer.

Gentle and just and dreadful, is he not
The monarch of the world? what then art thou? . . .
No refuge! no appeal— . . .

Sink with me then—
We two will sink in the wide waves of ruin
Even as a vulture and a snake outspent
Drop, twisted in inextricable fight,⁶
Into a shoreless sea.—Let Hell unlock
Its mounded Oceans of tempestuous fire,
And whelm on them^o into the bottomless void *wash them*
The desolated world and thee and me,
The conqueror and the conquered, and the wreck
Of that for which they combated.

Ai! Ai!⁷
The elements obey me not . . . I sink . . .
Dizzily down—ever, forever, down—
And, like a cloud, mine enemy above
Darkens my fall with victory!—Ai! Ai!

*From SCENE 4—A Forest. In the Background a Cave. PROMETHEUS, ASIA, PANTHEA, IONE, and the SPIRIT OF THE EARTH.*⁸

s s *

[The SPIRIT OF THE HOUR enters.]

PROMETHEUS We feel what thou hast heard and seen—yet speak.
SPIRIT OF THE HOUR Soon as the sound had ceased whose thunder filled
The abysses of the sky, and the wide earth,
There was a change . . . the impalpable thin air
And the all-circling sunlight were transformed
As if the sense of love dissolved in them
Had folded itself round the sphered world.
My vision then grew clear and I could see
Into the mysteries of the Universe.⁹
Dizzy as with delight I floated down,
Winnowing the lightsome air with languid plumes,
My coursers sought their birthplace in the sun
Where they henceforth will live exempt from toil,
Pasturing flowers of vegetable fire—
And where my moonlike car will stand within
A temple, gazed upon by Phidian forms,¹
Of thee, and Asia and the Earth, and me
And you fair nymphs, looking the love we feel,
In memory of the tidings it has borne,

6. The eagle (or vulture) and the snake locked in equal combat—a favorite Shelleyan image (cf. *Alastor*, lines 227-32, p. 752).

7. Traditional Greek cry of sorrow.

8. After Jupiter's annihilation (described in scene 2), Hercules unbinds Prometheus, who is reunited with Asia and retires to a cave "where we will sit and talk of time and change / . . . ourselves unchanged." In the speech that concludes the act (reprinted here) the Spirit of the Hour describes

what happened in the human world when he sounded the apocalyptic trumpet.

9. I.e., the earth's atmosphere clarifies, no longer refracting the sunlight, and so allows the Spirit of the Hour to see what is happening on earth.

1. The crescent-shaped ("moonlike") chariot, its apocalyptic mission accomplished, will be frozen to stone and will be surrounded by the sculptured forms of other agents in the drama. Phidias (5th century B.C.E.) was the noblest of Greek sculptors.

Beneath a dome fretted with graven flowers,
Poised on twelve columns of resplendent stone
And open to the bright and liquid sky.
Yoked to it by an amphisbaenic snake²
120 The likeness of those winged steeds will mock³
The flight from which they find repose.—Alas,
Whither has wandered now my partial⁴ tongue
When all remains untold which ye would hear!—
As I have said, I floated to the Earth:
125 It was, as it is still, the pain of bliss
To move, to breathe, to be; I wandering went
Among the haunts and dwellings of mankind
And first was disappointed not to see
Such mighty change as I had felt within
130 Expressed in outward things; but soon I looked,
And behold! thrones were kingless, and men walked
One with the other even as spirits do,
None fawned, none trampled; hate, disdain or fear,
Self-love or self-contempt on human brows
135 No more inscribed, as o'er the gate of hell,
"All hope abandon, ye who enter here";⁵
None frowned, none trembled, none with eager fear
Gazed on another's eye of cold command
Until the subject of a tyrant's will
140 Became, worse fate, the abject of his own⁶
Which spurred him, like an outspent^o horse, to death. *exhausted*
None wrought his lips in truth-entangling lines
Which smiled the lie his tongue disdained to speak;
None with firm sneer trod out in his own heart
145 The sparks of love and hope, till there remained
Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,
And the wretch crept, a vampire among men,
Infecting all with his own hideous ill.
None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk
i 50 Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes
Yet question that unmeant hypocrisy
With such a self-mistrust as has no name.
And women too, frank, beautiful and kind
As the free Heaven which rains fresh light and dew
155 On the wide earth, past: gentle, radiant forms,
From custom's evil taint exempt and pure;
Speaking the wisdom once they could not think,
Looking emotions once they feared to feel
And changed to all which once they dared not be,
160 Yet being now, made Earth like Heaven—nor pride
Nor jealousy nor envy nor ill shame,

2. A mythical snake with a head at each end; it serves here as a symbolic warning that a reversal of the process is always possible.

3. "Imitate" and also, in their immobility, "mock at" the flight they represent.

4. Biased or, possibly, telling only part of the story.

5. The inscription over the gate of hell in Dante's *Inferno* 3.9.

6. I.e., he was so abjectly enslaved that his own will accorded with the tyrant's will.

The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall,
Spoilt the sweet taste of the nepenthe,⁷ love.

165 Thrones, altars, judgement-seats and prisons; wherein
And beside which, by wretched men were borne
Sceptres, tiaras, swords and chains, and tomes
Of reasoned wrong glozed on⁸ by ignorance,
Were like those monstrous and barbaric shapes,
The ghosts of a no more remembered fame,
170 Which from their unworn obelisks⁹ look forth
In triumph o'er the palaces and tombs
Of those who were their conquerors, mouldering round.
Those imaged to the pride of Kings and Priests
A dark yet mighty faith, a power as wide
175 As is the world it wasted, and are now
But an astonishment; even so the tools
And emblems of its last captivity
Amid the dwellings of the peopled Earth,
Stand, not o'erthrown, but unregarded now.
180 And those foul shapes, abhorred by God and man—
Which under many a name and many a form
Strange, savage, ghastly, dark and execrable
Were Jupiter,¹⁰ the tyrant of the world;
And which the nations panic-stricken served
185 With blood, and hearts broken by long hope, and love
Dragged to his altars soiled and garlandless
And slain amid men's unreclaiming tears,
Flattering the thing they feared, which fear was hate—
Frown, mouldering fast, o'er their abandoned shrines.
190 The painted veil, by those who were, called life,¹¹
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:
195 Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree,—the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man:
Passionless? no—yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,
200 Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.¹²

7. A drug (probably opium) that brings forgetfulness of pain and sorrow.

8. Annotated, explained.

9. The Egyptian obelisks (tapering shafts of stone), brought to Rome by its conquering armies, included hieroglyphs that—because they were still undeciphered in Shelley's time—seemed "monstrous and barbaric shapes" (line 168).

1. The "foul shapes" (line 180) were statues of the

gods who, whatever their names, were all really manifestations of Jupiter.

2. I.e., which was thought to be life by humans as they were before their regeneration.

3. I.e., a dim point in the extreme of empty space. The sense of lines 198–204 is if regenerate man were to be released from all earthly and biological impediments ("clogs"), he would become what even the stars are not—a pure ideal.

From Act 4

SCENE – *A Part of the Forest near the Cave of PROMETHEUS.*

DEMOGORGON

This is the Day which down the void Abyss
555 At the Earth-born's spell⁵ yawns for Heaven's Despotism,
And Conquest is dragged Captive through the Deep;⁶
Love from its awful⁰ throne of patient power *awesome*
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
560 And narrow verge of crag-like Agony, springs
And folds over the world its healing wings.

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance, –
These are the seals of that most firm assurance
Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
565 And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
Mother of many acts and hours, should free
The serpent that would clasp her with his length⁷ –
These are the spells by which to reassume
An empire o'er the disentangled Doom.⁸

570 To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
575 Neither to change nor falter nor repent:
This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.

1818-19

1820

4. The original drama, completed in the spring of 1819, consisted of three acts. Later that year Shelley added a jubilant fourth act. In Revelation 21 the apocalyptic replacement of the old world by "a new heaven and new earth" had been symbolized by the marriage of the Lamb with the New Jerusalem. Shelley's fourth act, somewhat like the conclusion of Blake's *Jerusalem*, expands this figure into a cosmic epithalamion, representing a union of divided elements that enacts everywhere the reunion of Prometheus and Asia taking place off-stage.

Shelley's model is the Renaissance masque, which combines song and dance with spectacular displays. Panthea and Ione serve as commentators on the action, which is divided into three episodes. In the first episode the purified "Spirits of the human mind" unite in a ritual dance with the Hours of the glad new day. In the second episode (lines 194–318), there appear emblematic representations of the moon and the earth, each bearing

an infant whose hour has come round at last. Shelley based this description in part on Ezekiel 1, the vision of the chariot of divine glory, which had traditionally been interpreted as a portent of apocalypse. The third episode (lines 319–502) is the bacchanalian dance of the love-intoxicated Moon around her brother and paramour, the rejuvenescent Earth.

5. Prometheus's spell—the magically effective words of pity, rather than vengefulness, that he spoke in act 1.

6. Ephesians 4.8: "When [Christ] ascended up on high, he led captivity captive."

7. A final reminder that the serpent incessantly struggles to break loose and start the cycle of humanity's fall all over again.

8. Shelley's four cardinal virtues (line 562), which seal the serpent in the pit, also constitute the magic formulas ("spells") by which to remaster him, should he again break loose.

The Cloud

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noon-day dreams.
5 From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one,
When rocked to rest on their mother's⁰ breast, *earth's*
As she dances about the Sun.
I wield the flail¹ of the lashing hail,
10 And whiten the green plains under,
And then again I dissolve it in rain,
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

I sift the snow on the mountains below,
And their great pines groan aghast;
15 And all the night 'tis my pillow white,
While I sleep in the arms of the blast.
Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,
Lightning my pilot sits;
In a cavern under is fettered the thunder,
20 It struggles and howls at fits;⁰ *fitfully*
Over Earth and Ocean, with gentle motion,
This pilot is guiding me,
Lured by the love of the genii that move
In the depths of the purple sea;²
25 Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,
Over the lakes and the plains,
Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,
The Spirit he loves remains;
And I all the while bask in Heaven's blue smile,³
30 Whilst he is dissolving in rains.

The sanguine Sunrise, with his meteor eyes,
And his burning plumes outspread,⁴
Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,⁵
When the morning star shines dead;
35 As on the jag of a mountain crag,
Which an earthquake rocks and swings,
An eagle alit one moment may sit
In the light of its golden wings.
And when Sunset may breathe, from the lit Sea beneath,
40 Its ardours of rest and of love,
And the crimson pall^o of eve may fall *rich* *coverlet*
From the depth of Heaven above,

1. Either a weapon fashioned as a ball and chain or a tool for threshing grain.

2. I.e., atmospheric electricity, guiding the cloud (line 18), discharges as lightning when "lured" by the attraction of an opposite charge.

3. The upper part of the cloud remains exposed to the sun.

4. The sun's corona. "Meteor eyes": as bright as a burning meteor.

5. High, broken clouds, driven by the wind.

With wings folded I rest, on mine aery nest,
As still as a brooding dove.⁶
45 That orb'd maiden with white fire laden
Whom mortals call the Moon,
Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,
By the midnight breezes strewn;
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,
50 Which only the angels hear,
May have broken the woof,⁷ of my tent's thin roof, *texture*
The stars peep behind her, and peer;
And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,
Like a swarm of golden bees,
55 When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,
Are each paved with the moon and these.⁸

I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone⁹ *belt, sash*
60 And the Moon's with a girdle of pearl;
The volcanos are dim and the stars reel and swim
When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.
From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape,
Over a torrent sea,
65 Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof—
The mountains its columns be!
The triumphal arch, through which I march
With hurricane, fire, and snow,
When the Powers of the Air, are chained to my chair,⁹ *chariot*
70 Is the million-coloured Bow;
The sphere-fire⁹ above its soft colours wove *sunlight*
While the moist Earth was laughing below.

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
And the nursling of the Sky;
75 I pass through the pores, of the ocean and shores;
I change, but I cannot die—
For after the rain, when with never a stain
The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams,
80 Build up the blue dome of Air⁹—
I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,⁹
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise, and unbuild it again.—

1820

1820

6. An echo of Milton's description of his Muse, identified with the Holy Spirit, who "with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss" (*Paradise Lost* 1.20-21).

7. The stars reflected in the water.

8. The blue color of the sky. The phenomenon, as

Shelley indicates, results from the way "sunbeams" are filtered by the earth's atmosphere.

9. The memorial monument of the dead cloud is the cloudless blue dome of the sky. (The point is that a cenotaph is a monument that does not contain a corpse.)

To a Sky-Lark¹

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert –
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
5 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire;
The blue deep thou wingest,
10 And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken Sun –
O'er which clouds are brightning,
Thou dost float and run;
is Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even⁰ *evening*
Melts around thy flight,
Like a star of Heaven
In the broad day-light
20 Thou art unseen, – but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,²
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear
25 Until we hardly see – we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air
With thy voice is loud,
As when Night is bare
From one lonely cloud
30 The moon rains out her beams – and Heaven is overflowed.

What thou art we know not;
What is most like thee?
From rainbow clouds there flow not
Drops so bright to see
35 As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
40 To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

1. The European skylark is a small bird that sings only in flight, often when it is too high to be visible.

2. The morning star, Venus.

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- Like a high-born maiden
In a palace-tower,
Soothing her love-laden
Soul in secret hour,
45 With music sweet as love – which overflows her bower:
- Like a glow-worm golden
In a dell of dew,
Scattering unbeholden
Its aerial hue
50 Among the flowers and grass which screen it from the view:
- Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves –
By warm winds deflowered –
Till the scent it gives
55 Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves:³
- Sound of vernal" showers *springtime*
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was
60 Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass.
- Teach us, Sprite" or Rird, *spirit*
What sweet thoughts are thine;
I have never heard
Praise of love or wine
65 That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine:
- Chorus Hymeneal⁴
Or triumphal chaunt
Matched with thine would be all
Rut an empty vaunt,
70 A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.
- What objects are the fountains
Of thy happy strain?
What fields or waves or mountains?
What shapes of sky or plain?
75 What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?
- With thy clear keen joyance
Languor cannot be –
Shadow of annoyance
Never came near thee;
so Thou lovest – but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.
- Waking or asleep,
Thou of death must deem
Things more true and deep

3. The "warm winds," line 53.

4. Marital (from Hymen, Greek god of marriage).

Than we mortals dream,
85 Or how could thy notes flow in such a chrystal stream?

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not –
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught –
90 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet if we could scorn
Hate and pride and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
95 I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures
Of delightful sound –
Better than all treasures
That in books are found –
100 Thy skill to poet were, thou Scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
105 The world should listen then – as I am listening now.

1820

1820

To Night

Swiftly walk o'er the western wave,
Spirit of Night!
Out of the misty eastern cave
Where, all the long and lone daylight
5 Thou wovest dreams of joy and fear,
Which make thee terrible and dear,
Swift be thy flight!

Wrap thy form in a mantle grey,
Star-inwrought!
10 Blind with thine hair the eyes of day,
Kiss her until she be wearied out -
Then wander o'er City and sea and land,
Touching all with thine opiate wand –
Come, long-sought!

15 When I arose and saw the dawn
I sighed for thee;
When Light rode high, and the dew was gone,
And noon lay heavy on flower and tree,

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20 And the weary Day¹ turned to his rest,
Lingering like an unloved guest,
I sighed for thee.

Thy brother Death came, and cried,
Wouldst thou me?

25 Thy sweet child Sleep, the filmy-eyed,
Murmured like a noontide bee,
Shall I nestle near thy side?
Wouldst thou me? and I replied,
No, not thee!

30 Death will come when thou art dead,
Soon, too soon—
Sleep will come when thou art fled;
Of neither would I ask the boon
I ask of thee, beloved Night—

35 Swift be thine approaching flight,
Come soon, soon!

1820

1824

To [Music, when soft voices die]¹

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory.—
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.²—

enliven

5 Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed³—
And so thy thoughts,³ when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

1821

1824

O World, O Life, O Time¹

O World, O Life, O Time,
On whose last steps I climb,
Trembling at that where I had stood before,
When will return the glory of your prime?
No more, O never more!

1. Here the "Day" is the male sun, not the female "day" with whom the Spirit of Night dallies in the preceding stanza.

1. This poem was first published under the title "Memory" in Mary Shelley's edition of her husband's *Posthumous Poems* in 1824, with the two stanzas in the reverse order from what we give here. Our text is based on a version found in a

notebook of Percy Shelley's now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

2. The bed of the dead rose.

3. I.e., my thoughts of thee.

1. For the author's revisions while composing this poem, see "Poems in Process," in the appendices to this volume.

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight—
Fresh spring and summer [] and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
10 No more, O never more!

1824

Chorus from *Hellas*¹

The world's great age

The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years' return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds' outworn;
5 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

A brighter Hellas rears its mountains
From waves serener far,
A new Peneus' rolls his fountains
10 Against the morning-star,
Where fairer Tempes bloom, there sleep
Young Cyclads' on a sunnier deep.

A loftier Argo' cleaves the main,
Fraught with a later prize;
15 Another Orpheus' sings again,
And loves, and weeps, and dies;
A new Ulysses leaves once more
Calypso' for his native shore.

O, write no more the tale of Troy,
20 If earth Death's scroll must be!
Nor mix with Laian' rage the joy

1. *Hellas*, a closet drama written in the autumn of 1821, was inspired by the Greek war for independence against the Turks. ("Hellas" is another name for Greece.) In his preface Shelley declared that he viewed this revolution as foretelling the final overthrow of all tyranny. The choruses throughout are sung by enslaved Greek women. We give the chorus that concludes the drama.

2. Prophecies of wars, and rumours of wars, etc., may safely be made by poet or prophet in any age, but to anticipate however darkly a period of regeneration and happiness is a more hazardous exercise of the faculty which bards possess or feign. It will remind the reader . . . of Isaiah and Virgil, whose ardent spirits . . . saw the possible and perhaps approaching state of society in which the "lion shall lie down with the lamb," and "*otinnis feret omnia tellus*." Let these great names be my authority and excuse [Shelley's note]. The quotations are from Isaiah's millennial prophecy (e.g., chaps. 25, 45), and Virgil's prediction, in *Eclogue* 4, of a

return of the golden age, when "all the earth will produce all things."

3. In Greek myth the first period of history, when Saturn reigned.

4. Clothes (especially mourning garments) as well as dead vegetation.

5. The river in northeast Greece that flows through the beautiful vale of Tempe (line 11).

6. The Cyclades, islands in the Aegean Sea.

7. On which Jason sailed in his quest for the Golden Fleece.

8. The legendary player on the lyre who was torn to pieces by the frenzied Thracian women while he was mourning the death of his wife, Eurydice.

9. The nymph deserted by Ulysses on his voyage back from the Trojan War to his native Ithaca.

1. King Laius of Thebes was killed in a quarrel by his son Oedipus, who did not recognize his father. Shortly thereafter Oedipus delivered Thebes from the ravages of the Sphinx by answering its riddle (lines 23-24).

Which dawns upon the free;
Although a subtler Sphinx renew
Riddles of death Thebes never knew.

25 Another Athens shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendour of its prime,
And leave, if nought so bright may live,
30 All earth can take or Heaven can give.

Saturn and Love their long repose
Shall burst, more bright and good
Than all who fell, than One who rose,
Than many unsubdued;²
35 Not gold, not blood their altar dowers⁰ *gifts*
But votive tears and symbol flowers.

O cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?
Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
40 Of bitter prophecy.
The world is weary of the past,
O might it die or rest at last!

1821

1822

Adonais John Keats died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried there in the Protestant Cemetery. Shelley had met Keats, had invited him to be his guest at Pisa, and had gradually come to realize that he was "among the writers of the highest genius who have adorned our age" (Preface to *Adonais*). The name "Adonais" is derived from Adonis, the handsome youth who had been loved by the goddess Venus and slain by a wild boar. He was restored to life on the condition that he spend only part of every year with Venus in heaven and the other part with Proserpine in the underworld. This cycle of rebirth and death, symbolic of the alternate return of summer and winter, suggests why Adonis was central to ancient fertility myths. Shelley in his poem gives the role of the boar to the anonymous author of a vituperative review of Keats's *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*, April 1818 (now known to be John Wilson Croker), whom Shelley mistakenly believed to be responsible for Keats's illness and death.

Shelley in a letter described *Adonais*, which he wrote in April–June 1821 and had printed in Pisa in July, as a "highly wrought piece of art." Its artistry consists in part in the care with which it follows the conventions of the pastoral elegy, established more than two thousand years earlier by the Greek Sicilian poets Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus—Shelley had translated into English Bion's *Lament for Adonis* and Moschus's *Lament for Bion*. We recognize the centuries-old poetic ritual in many verbal echoes and in devices such as the mournful and accusing invocation to a muse (stanzas 2–4), the sympathetic participation of nature in the grieving (stanzas 14–17), the procession of appropriate mourners (stanzas 30–35), the denunciation of

2. Saturn and Love were among the deities of a real or imaginary state of innocence and happiness. "All" those "who fell" [are] the Gods of Greece, Asia, and Egypt; the "One who rose" [is] Jesus

Christ . . . and the "many unsubdued" [are] the monstrous objects of the idolatry of China, India, the Antarctic islands, and the native tribes of America [Shelley's note].

unworthy practitioners of the pastoral or literary art (stanzas 17, 27–29, 36–37), and above all, in the turn from despair at the finality of human death (lines 1, 64, 190: "He will awake no more, oh, never more!") to consolation in the sudden and contradictory discovery that the grave is a gate to a higher existence (line 343: "Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep").

Published first in Pisa, Italy, in 1821, *Adonais* was not issued in England until 1829, in an edition sponsored by the so-called Cambridge Apostles (the minor poet R. M. Milnes and the more famous poets Alfred Tennyson and A. H. Hallam). The appearance of this edition marked the beginning of Keats's posthumous emergence from obscurity.

Adonais

An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, Author of Endymion, Hyperion, etc.

[Thou wert the morning star among the living,
Ere thy fair light had fled—
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
New splendour to the dead.]

1

I weep for Adonais—he is dead!
O, weep for Adonais! though our tears
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!
And thou, sad Hour,² selected from all years
5 To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,⁰ *companions*
And teach them thine own sorrow, say: with me
Died Adonais; till the Future dares
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto eternity!

2

io Where wert thou mighty Mother,³ when he lay,
When thy Son lay, pierced by the shaft which flies
In darkness?⁴ where was lorn^o Urania *forlorn*
When Adonais died? With veiled eyes,
'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise
is She sate, while one,¹ with soft enamoured breath,
Rekindled all the fading melodies,
With which, like flowers that mock the corse⁰ beneath, *corpse*
He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of death.

3

20 O, weep for Adonais—he is dead!
Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!
Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed
Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep

1. Shelley prefixed to *Adonais* a Greek epigram attributed to Plato; this is Shelley's translation of the Greek. The planet Venus appears both as the morning star, Lucifer, and as the evening star, Hesperus or Vesper. Shelley makes of this phenomenon a key symbol for Adonais's triumph over death, in stanzas 44–46.

2. Shelley follows the classical mode of personifying the hours, which mark the passage of time

and turn of the seasons.

3. Urania. She had originally been the Muse of astronomy, but the name was also an epithet for Venus. Shelley converts Venus Urania, who in Greek myth had been the lover of Adonis, into the mother of Adonais.

4. Alludes to the anonymity of the review of *Endymion*.

5. I.e., the echo of Keats's voice in his poems.

Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;
For he is gone, where all things wise and fair
Descend;—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep⁶ *abyss*
Will yet restore him to the vital air;
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.

4

Most musical of mourners, weep again!
Lament anew, Urania!—He⁷ died,
Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
Of lust and blood; he went, unterrified,
Into the gulph of death; but his clear Sprite⁸ *spirit*
Yet reigns o'er earth; the third among the sons of light.⁹

5

Most musical of mourners, weep anew!
Not all to that bright station dared to climb;
And happier they their happiness who knew,
Whose tapers⁹ yet burn through that night of time *candles*
In which suns perished; others more sublime,
Struck by the envious wrath of man or God,
Have sunk, extinct in their refulgent⁹ prime; *radiant*
And some yet live, treading the thorny road,
Which leads, through toil and hate, to Fame's serene abode.

6

But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished—
The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew,
Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished,
And fed with true love tears, instead of dew;⁸
Most musical of mourners, weep anew!
Thy extreme⁹ hope, the loveliest and the last,
The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew⁸ *bloomed*
Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;
The broken lily lies—the storm is overpast.

7

To that high Capital,⁶ where kingly Death *Rome*
Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay,
He came; and bought, with price of purest breath,
A grave among the eternal.—Come away!
Haste, while the vault of blue Italian day
Is yet his fitting charnel-roof! while still
He lies, as if in dewy sleep he lay;

6. Milton, regarded as precursor of the great poetic tradition in which Keats wrote. He had adopted Urania as the muse of *Paradise Lost*. Lines 31–35 describe Milton's life during the restoration of the Stuart monarchy.

7. In "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley says that Mil-

ton was the third great epic poet, along with Homer and Dante. The stanza following describes the lot of other poets, up to Shelley's own time.

8. An allusion to an incident in Keats's *Isabella*.

9. Last, as well as highest.

Awake him not! surely he takes his fill
Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill.

8

65 He will awake no more, oh, never more!—
Within the twilight chamber spreads apace,
The shadow of white Death, and at the door
Invisible Corruption waits to trace
His extreme way to her dim dwelling-place;
70 The eternal Hunger sits, but pity and awe
Soothe her pale rage, nor dares she to deface
So fair a prey, till darkness, and the law
Of change, shall 'oer his sleep the mortal curtain draw.

9

O, weep for Adonais!—The quick^o Dreams, *living*
The passion-winged Ministers of thought,
75 Who were his flocks,¹ whom near the living streams
Of his young spirit he fed, and whom he taught
The love which was its music, wander not,—
Wander no more, from kindling brain to brain,
But droop there, whence they sprung; and mourn their lot
so Round the cold heart, where, after their sweet pain,
They ne'er will gather strength, or find a home again.

10

And one² with trembling hands clasps his cold head,
And fans him with her moonlight wings, and cries;
"Our love, our hope, our sorrow, is not dead;
85 See, on the silken fringe of his faint eyes,
Like dew upon a sleeping flower, there lies
A tear some Dream has loosened from his brain."
Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise!
90 She knew not 'twas her own; as with no stain
She faded, like a cloud which had outwept its rain.

11

One from a lucid^o urn of starry dew *luminous*
Washed his light limbs as if embalming them;
Another clipt her profuse locks, and threw
95 The wreath upon him, like an anadem,^o *rich garland*
Which frozen tears instead of pearls begem;
Another in her wilful grief would break
Her bow and winged reeds, as if to stem
A greater loss with one which was more weak;
And dull the barbed fire against his frozen cheek.

12

⓪ Another Splendour on his mouth alit,
That mouth, whence it was wont^o to draw the breath *accustomed*
Which gave it strength to pierce the guarded wit,³

1. The products of Keats's imagination, figuratively represented (according to the conventions of the pastoral elegy) as his sheep.

2. One of the Dreams (line 73).

3. The cautious intellect (of the listener),

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And pass into the panting heart beneath
With lightning and with music: the damp death
105 Quenched its caress upon his icy lips;
And, as a dying meteor stains a wreath
Of moonlight vapour, which the cold night clips,
It flushed through his pale limbs, and past to its eclipse.

13

And others came . . . Desires and Adorations,
110 Winged Persuasions and veiled Destinies,
Splendours, and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations
Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies;
And Sorrow, with her family of Sighs,
And Pleasure, blind with tears, led by the gleam
115 Of her own dying smile instead of eyes,
Came in slow pomp;—the moving pomp might seem
Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream.

14

All he had loved, and moulded into thought,
From shape, and hue, and odour, and sweet sound,
120 Lamented Adonais. Morning sought
Her eastern watchtower, and her hair unbound,
Wet with the tears which should adorn the ground,
Dimmed the aerial eyes that kindle day;
Afar the melancholy thunder moaned,
125 Pale Ocean in unquiet slumber lay,
And the wild winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay.

15

Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains,
And feeds her grief with his remembered lay,^o *song*
And will no more reply to winds or fountains,
130 Or amorous birds perched on the young green spray,
Or herdsman's horn, or bell at closing day;
Since she can mimic not his lips, more dear
Than those for whose disdain she pined away
Into a shadow of all sounds:⁴—a drear
135 Murmur, between their songs, is all the woodmen hear.

16

Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down
Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were,
Or they dead leaves; since her delight is flown
For whom should she have waked the sullen year?
140 To Phoebus was not Hyacinth so dear⁵
Nor to himself Narcissus, as to both
Thou Adonais: wan they stand and sere⁶
Amid the faint companions of their youth,
With dew all turned to tears; odour, to sighing ruth.^o *pity*

4. Because of her unrequited love for Narcissus, who was enamored of his own reflection (line 141), the nymph Echo pined away until she was only a reflected sound.

5. Young Hyacinthus was loved by Phoebus

Apollo, who accidentally killed him in a game of quoits. Apollo made the hyacinth flower spring from his blood.

6. Dried, withered.

145 Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale⁷
Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain;
Not so the eagle, who like thee could scale
Heaven, and could nourish in the sun's domain
Her mighty youth with morning,⁸ doth complain,⁰ *lament*
150 Soaring and screaming round her empty nest,
As Albion⁰ wails for thee: the curse of Cain *England*
Light on his head⁹ who pierced thy innocent breast,
And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest!

18

Ah woe is me! Winter is come and gone,
155 But grief returns with the revolving year;
The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;
The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear;
Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Seasons' bier;
The amorous birds now pair in every brake,⁰ *thicket*
160 And build their mossy homes in field and brere;⁰ *briar*
And the green lizard, and the golden snake,
Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.

19

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst
165 As it has ever done, with change and motion,
From the great morning of the world when first
God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed
The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;
All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;
170 Diffuse themselves; and spend in love's delight,
The beauty and the joy of their renewed might.

20

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender
Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;
Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour
175 Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death
And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;
Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows
Be as a sword consumed before the sheath¹
By sightless⁰ lightning?—th' intense atom glows *invisible*
180 A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose.

21

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,
But for our grief, as if it had not been,
And grief itself be mortal! Woe is me!
Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene
185 The actors or spectators? Great and mean⁰ *low*
Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.

7. To whom Keats had written "Ode to a Nightingale."

8. In the legend the aged eagle, to renew his youth, flies toward the sun until his old plumage

is burned off and the film cleared from his eyes.

9. The reviewer of *Endymion*.

1. The "sword" is the mind that knows; the "sheath" is its vehicle, the material body.

828 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.

22

190 *He will awake no more, oh, never more!*
"Wake thou," cried Misery, "childless Mother, rise
Out of thy sleep, and slake,^o in thy heart's core, *assuage*
A wound more fierce than his with tears and sighs."
And all the Dreams that watched Urania's eyes,
195 And all the Echoes whom their sister's song²
Had held in holy silence, cried: "Arise!"
Swift as a Thought by the snake Memory stung,
From her ambrosial rest the fading Splendour^o sprung. *Urania*

23

200 She rose like an autumnal Night, that springs
Out of the East, and follows wild and drear
The golden Day, which, on eternal wings,
Even as a ghost abandoning a bier,
Had left the Earth a corpse. Sorrow and fear
So struck, so roused, so rapt Urania;
205 So saddened round her like an atmosphere
Of stormy mist; so swept her on her way
Even to the mournful place where Adonais lay.

24

210 Out of her secret Paradise she sped,
Through camps and cities rough with stone, and steel,
And human hearts, which to her aery tread
Yielding not, wounded the invisible
Palms of her tender feet where'er they fell:
And barbed tongues, and thoughts more sharp than they
Rent^o the soft Form they never could repel, *tore*
215 Whose sacred blood, like the young tears of May,
Paved with eternal flowers that undeserving way.

25

220 In the death chamber for a moment Death
Shamed by the presence of that living Might
Blushed to annihilation, and the breath
Revisited those lips, and life's pale light
Flashed through those limbs, so late her dear delight.
"Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,
As silent lightning leaves the starless night!
Leave me not!" cried Urania: her distress
225 Roused Death: Death rose and smiled, and met her vain caress.

26

"Stay yet awhile! speak to me once again;
Kiss me, so long but as a kiss may live;
And in my heartless' breast and burning brain

2. I.e., the Echo in line 127.

3. Because her heart had been given to Adonais.

230 That word, that kiss shall all thoughts else survive
With food of saddest memory kept alive,
Now thou art dead, as if it were a part
Of thee, my Adonais! I would give
All that I am to be as thou now art!
But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart!

27

235 "Oh gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,
Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men
Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart
Dare° the unpastured dragon in his den?⁴ *challenge*
Defenceless as thou wert, oh where was then
240 Wisdom the mirrored shield, or scorn the spear?⁵
Or hadst thou waited the full cycle, when
Thy spirit should have filled its crescent sphere,⁶
The monsters of life's waste had fled from thee like deer.

28

245 "The herded wolves, bold only to pursue;
The obscene ravens, clamorous o'er the dead;
The vultures to the conqueror's banner true
Who feed where Desolation first has fed,
And whose wings rain contagion;—how they fled,
When like Apollo, from his golden bow,
250 The Pythian of the age⁷ one arrow sped
And smiled!—The spoilers tempt no second blow,
They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low.

"The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;
He sets, and each ephemeral insect⁸ then
255 Is gathered into death without a dawn,
And the immortal stars awake again;
So is it in the world of living men:
A godlike mind soars forth, in its delight
Making earth bare and veiling heaven,⁹ and when
260 It sinks, the swarms that dimmed or shared its light
Leave to its kindred lamps' the spirit's awful night."

3°

Thus ceased she: and the mountain shepherds came,
Their garlands sere, their magic mantles⁰ rent; *cloaks*
The Pilgrim of Eternity,² whose fame
265 Over his living head like Heaven is bent,
An early but enduring monument,

4. I.e., the hostile reviewers.

5. The allusion is to Perseus, who had cut off Medusa's head while avoiding the direct sight of her (which would have turned him to stone) by looking only at her reflection in his shield.

6. I.e., when thy spirit, like the full moon, should have reached its maturity.

7. Byron, who had directed against critics of the age his satiric poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). The allusion is to Apollo, called

"the Pythian" because he had slain the dragon Python.

8. Insect that lives and dies in a single day.

9. As the sun reveals the earth but veils the other stars.

1. The other stars (i.e., creative minds), of lesser brilliance than the sun.

2. Byron, who had referred to his Childe Harold as one of the "wanderers o'er Eternity" (3.669).

830 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Came, veiling all the lightnings of his song
In sorrow; from her wilds Ierne sent
The sweetest lyrist' of her saddest wrong,
270 And love taught grief to fall like music from his tongue.

31

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,⁴
A phantom among men; companionless
As the last cloud of an expiring storm
Whose thunder is its knell;^o he, as I guess, *funeral bell*
275 Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,
Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,
And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,
Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey.⁵

32

280 A pardlike^o Spirit beautiful and swift— *leopardlike*
A Love in desolation masked;—a Power
Girt round with weakness;—it can scarce uplift
The weight of the superincumbent hour;⁶
It is a dying lamp, a falling shower,
285 A breaking billow;—even whilst we speak
Is it not broken? On the withering flower
The killing sun smiles brightly: on a cheek
The life can burn in blood, even while the heart may break.

33

His head was bound with pansies overblown,
290 And faded violets, white, and pied, and blue;
And a light spear topped with a cypress cone,
Round whose rude shaft dark ivy tresses grew⁷
Yet dripping with the forest's noonday dew,
Vibrated, as the ever-beating heart
295 Shook the weak hand that grasped it; of that crew
He came the last, neglected and apart;
A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart.

34

All stood aloof, and at his partial moan
Smiled through their tears; well knew that gentle band
300 Who in another's fate now wept his own;
As in the accents of an unknown land,
He sung new sorrow; sad Urania scanned
The Stranger's mien, and murmured: "who art thou?"
He answered not, but with a sudden hand

3. Thomas Moore (1779-1852), from Ireland ("Ierne"), who had written poems about the oppression of his native land.

4. Shelley, represented in one of his aspects—such as the Poet in *Alastor*, rather than the author of *Prometheus Unbound*.

5. Actaeon, while hunting, came upon the naked Diana bathing and, as a punishment, was turned

into a stag and torn to pieces by his own hounds.

6. The heavy, overhanging hour of Keats's death.

7. Like the thyrsus, the leaf-entwined and cone-topped staff carried by Dionysus, to whom leopards (see line 280) are sacred. The pansies, which are "overblown," i.e., past their bloom, are emblems of sorrowful thought. The cypress is an emblem of mourning.

305 Made bare his branded and ensanguined⁰ brow, *bloodied*
Which was like Cain's or Christ's⁸ – Oh! that it should be so!

35

What softer voice is hushed over the dead?
Athwart what brow is that dark mantle thrown?
What form leans sadly o'er the white death-bed,
310 In mockery of monumental stone,⁹
The heavy heart heaving without a moan?
If it be He,¹ who, gentlest of the wise,
Taught, soothed, loved, honoured the departed one;
Let me not vex, with inharmonious sighs
315 The silence of that heart's accepted sacrifice.

36

Our Adonais has drunk poison – oh!
What deaf and viperous murderer could crown
Life's early cup with such a draught of woe?
The nameless worm² would now itself disown:
320 It felt, yet could escape the magic tone
Whose prelude held all envy, hate, and wrong,
But what was howling in one breast alone,
Silent with expectation of the song,³
Whose master's hand is cold, whose silver lyre unstrung.

37

325 Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!
Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,
Thou noteless blot on a remembered name!
But be thyself, and know thyself to be!
And ever at thy season be thou free
330 To spill the venom when thy fangs o'erflow:
Remorse and Self-contempt shall cling to thee;
Hot Shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,
And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt – as now.

38

Nor let us weep that our delight is fled
335 Far from these carrion kites⁴ that scream below;
He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;
Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now. –
Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
340 A portion of the Eternal,⁵ which must glow
Through time and change, unquenchably the same,
Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame.

8. His bloody ("ensanguined") brow bore a mark like that with which God had branded Cain for murdering Abel – or like that left by Christ's crown of thorns.

9. In imitation of a memorial statue.

1. Leigh Hunt, close friend of both Keats and Shelley.

2. Snake – the anonymous reviewer.

3. The promise of later greatness in Keats's early poems "held . . . silent" the expression of "all envy, hate, and wrong" except the reviewer's.

4. A species of hawk that feeds on dead flesh.

5. Shelley adopts for this poem the Neoplatonic view that all life and all forms emanate from the Absolute, the eternal One. The Absolute is imaged as both a radiant light source and an overflowing

39

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep –
He hath awakened from the dream of life –
345 Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings. – We decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
350 Convulse us and consume us day by day,
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

40

He has outsoared the shadow of our night;⁶
Envy and calumny⁰ and hate and pain, *slander*
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
355 Can touch him not and torture not again;
From the contagion of the world's slow stain
He is secure, and now can never mourn
A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain;
Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,
360 With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn.

41

He lives, he wakes – 'tis Death is dead, not he;
Mourn not for Adonais. – Thou young Dawn
Turn all thy dew to splendour, for from thee
The spirit thou lamentest is not gone;
365 Ye caverns and ye forests, cease to moan!
Cease ye faint flowers and fountains, and thou Air
Which like a mourning veil thy scarf hadst thrown
O'er the abandoned Earth, now leave it bare
Even to the joyous stars which smile on its despair!⁷

42

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;⁸
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
375 Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
Which wields the world with never wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

43

He is a portion of the loveliness
380 Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear
His part, while the one Spirit's plastic⁹ stress
Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there,

fountain, which circulates continuously through the dross of matter (stanza 43) and back to its source.

6. He has soared beyond the shadow cast by the earth as it intercepts the sun's light.

7. Shelley's science is, as usual, accurate: it is the

envelope of air around the earth that, by diffusing and reflecting sunlight, veils the stars so that they are invisible during the day.

8. The nightingale, in allusion to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

9. Formative, shaping.

All new successions to the forms they wear;
Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;¹
And bursting in its beauty and its might
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

44

The splendours of the firmament of time
May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;
Like stars to their appointed height they climb
And death is a low mist which cannot blot
The brightness it may veil.² When lofty thought
Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,
And love and life contend in it, for what³ *whatever*
Shall be its earthly doom,⁴ the dead live there⁵ *destiny*
And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air.

45

The inheritors of unfulfilled renown⁶
Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought,
Far in the Unapparent. Chatterton
Rose pale, his solemn agony had not
Yet faded from him; Sidney, as he fought
And as he fell and as he lived and loved
Sublimely mild, a Spirit without spot,
Arose; and Lucan, by his death approved:⁷ *justified*
Oblivion as they rose shrank like a thing reprov'd.

46

And many more, whose names on Earth are dark
But whose transmitted effluence cannot die
So long as fire outlives the parent spark,
Rose, robed in dazzling immortality.
"Thou art become as one of us," they cry,
"It was for thee yon kingless sphere has long
Swung blind in unascended majesty,
Silent alone amid an Heaven of song.
Assume thy winged throne, thou Vesper of our throng!"⁸

47

Who mourns for Adonais? oh come forth
Fond⁹ wretch! and know thyself and him aright. *foolish*
Clasp with thy panting soul the pendulous¹⁰ Earth;
As from a centre, dart thy spirit's light
Beyond all worlds, until its spacious might¹¹ *power*
Sate the void circumference: then shrink

1. I.e., to the degree that a particular substance will permit.

2. The radiance of stars (i.e., of poets) persists, even when they are temporarily "eclipsed" by another heavenly body, or obscured by the veil of the earth's atmosphere.

3. I.e., in the thought of the "young heart."

4. Poets who (like Keats) died young, before achieving their full measure of fame: the seventeen-year-old Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770) was believed to have committed suicide out

of despair over his poverty and lack of recognition, Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) died in battle at thirty-two, and the Roman poet Lucan (39–65 c.E.) killed himself at twenty-six to escape a sentence of death for having plotted against the tyrant Nero.

5. Adonais assumes his place in the sphere of Vesper, the evening star, hitherto unoccupied ("kingless"), hence also "silent" amid the music of the other spheres.

6. Suspended, floating in space.

834 / PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Even to a point within our day and night;⁷
And keep thy heart light lest it make thee sink
When hope has kindled hope, and lured thee to the brink.

48

Or go to Rome, which is the sepulchre
425 O, not of him, but of our joy: 'tis nought
That ages, empires, and religions there
Lie buried in the ravage they have wrought;
For such as he can lend, — they⁸ borrow not
430 Glory from those who made the world their prey;
And he is gathered to the kings of thought
Who waged contention with their time's decay,
And of the past are all that cannot pass away.

49

Go thou to Rome, — at once the Paradise,
The grave, the city, and the wilderness;
435 And where its wrecks⁰ like shattered mountains rise, *ruins*
And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses⁹ dress
The bones of Desolation's nakedness
Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead
Thy footsteps to a slope of green access¹
440 Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead,
A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread.

50

And grey walls moulder round,² on which dull Time
Feeds, like slow fire upon a hoary brand;³
And one keen pyramid with wedge sublime,⁴
445 Pavilioning the dust of him who planned
This refuge for his memory, doth stand
Like flame transformed to marble; and beneath,
A field is spread, on which a newer band
Have pitched in Heaven's smile their camp of death⁵
450 Welcoming him we lose with scarce extinguished breath.

51

Here pause: these graves are all too young as yet
To have outgrown the sorrow which consigned
Its charge to each; and if the seal is set,
Here, on one fountain of a mourning mind,⁶
455 Break it not thou! too surely shalt thou find
Thine own well full, if thou returnest home,
Of tears and gall. From the world's bitter wind

7. The poet bids the mourner to stretch his imagination so as to reach the poet's own cosmic viewpoint and then allow it to contract ("shrink") back to its ordinary vantage point on Earth—where, unlike Adonais in his heavenly place, we have an alternation of day and night.

8. Poets such as Keats.

9. Undergrowth. In Shelley's time the ruins of ancient Rome were overgrown with weeds and shrubs, almost as if the ground were returning to its natural state.

1. The Protestant Cemetery, Keats's burial place.

The next line is a glancing allusion to Shelley's three-year-old son, William, also buried there.

2. The wall of ancient Rome formed one boundary of the cemetery.

3. A burning log, white with ash.

4. The tomb of Caius Cestius, a Roman tribune, just outside the cemetery.

5. A common name for a cemetery in Italy is *camposanto*, "holy camp or ground." Shelley is punning seriously on the Italian word.

6. Shelley's mourning for his son.

Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.
What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

5²

460 The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.⁷ – Die,
465 If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled! – Rome's azure sky,
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.

53

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?
470 Thy hopes are gone before; from all things here
They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!
A light is past⁰ from the revolving year, *passed*
And man, and woman; and what still is dear
Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.
475 The soft sky smiles, – the low wind whispers near:
'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,
No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

54

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,
That Reauty in which all things work and move,
480 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
Which through the web of being blindly wove
By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of"
485 The fire for which all thirst;⁹ now beams on me,
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

55

The breath whose might I have invoked in song¹
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
490 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!²
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
495 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

1821

1821

7. Earthly life colors ("stains") the pure white light of the One, which is the source of all light (see lines 339-40, n. 5). The azure sky, flowers, etc., of lines 466-68 exemplify earthly colors that, however beautiful, fall far short of the "glory" of the pure Light that they transmit but also refract ("transfuse").

8. I.e., according to the degree that each reflects.

9. The "thirst" of the human spirit is to return to

the fountain and fire (the "burning fountain," line 339) that are its source.

1. Two years earlier Shelley had "invoked" (prayed to, and also asked for) "the breath of Autumn's being" in his "Ode to the West Wind" (p. 772).

2. In her 1839 edition of her husband's works, Mary Shelley asked: "who but will regard as a prophecy the last stanza of the 'Adonais'?"

When the lamp is shattered

When the lamp is shattered
The light in the dust lies dead –
When the cloud is scattered
The rainbow's glory is shed –
When the lute is broken
Sweet tones are remembered not –
When the lips have spoken
Loved accents are soon forgot.

As music and splendour
10 Survive not the lamp and the lute,
The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute –
No song – but sad dirges
Like the wind through a ruined cell
is Or the mournful surges
That ring the dead seaman's knell.

When hearts have once mingled
Love first leaves the well-built nest –
The weak one is singled
20 To endure what it once possest.
O Love! who bewailest
The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home and your bier?

Its passions will rock thee
25 As the storms rock the ravens on high –
Bright Reason will mock thee
Like the Sun from a wintry sky –
From thy nest every rafter
30 Will rot, and thine eagle home
Leave thee naked to laughter
When leaves fall and cold winds come.

1822

1824

To Jane¹ (The keen stars were twinkling)

The keen stars were twinkling
And the fair moon was rising among them,
Dear Jane.
The guitar was tinkling
5 But the notes were not sweet 'till you sung them
Again. –

1. Jane Williams, the common-law wife of Shelley's close friend Edward Williams.

As the moon's soft splendour
O'er the faint cold starlight of Heaven
Is thrown—
10 So your voice most tender
To the strings without soul had then given
Its own.

The stars will awaken,
Though the moon sleep a full hour later,
15 Tonight;
No leaf will be shaken
While the dews of your melody scatter
Delight.
Though the sound overpowers
20 Sing again, with your dear voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.

1822

1832

A Defence of Poetry In 1820 Shelley's good friend Thomas Love Peacock published an ironic essay, "The Four Ages of Poetry," implicitly directed against the towering claims for poetry and the poetic imagination made by his Romantic contemporaries. In this essay, which is available at Norton Literature Online, Peacock adopted the premise of Wordsworth and some other Romantic critics—that poetry in its origin was a primitive use of language and mind—but from this premise he proceeded to draw the conclusion that poetry had become a useless anachronism in his own Age of Bronze, a time defined by new sciences (including economics and political theory) and technologies that had the potential to improve the world. Peacock was a poet as well as an excellent prose satirist, and Shelley saw the joke; but he also recognized that the view that Peacock, as a satirist, had assumed was very close to that actually held in his day by Utilitarian philosophers and the material-minded public, which either attacked or contemptuously ignored the imaginative faculty and its achievements. He therefore undertook, as he good-humoredly wrote to Peacock, "to break a lance with you . . . in honor of my mistress Urania" (giving the cause for which he battled the name that Milton had used for the muse inspiring *Paradise Lost*), even though he was only "the knight of the shield of shadow and the lance of gossamere." The result was "A Defence of Poetry," planned to consist of three parts. The last two parts were never written, and even the existing section, written in 1821, remained unpublished until 1840, eighteen years after Shelley's death.

Shelley's emphasis in this essay is not on the particularity of individual poems but on the universal and permanent qualities and values that, he believes, all great poems, as products of imagination, have in common. Shelley in addition extends the term *poet* to include all creative minds that break out of the conditions of their historical time and place in order to envision such values. This category includes not only writers in prose as well as verse but also artists, legislators, prophets, and the founders of new social and religious institutions.

The "Defence" is an eloquent and enduring claim for the indispensability of the visionary and creative imagination in all the great human concerns. Few later social

critics have equaled the cogency of Shelley's attack on our acquisitive society and its narrowly material concepts of utility and progress. Such a bias has opened the way to enormous advances in the physical sciences and our material well-being, but without a proportionate development of our "poetic faculty," the moral imagination. The result, Shelley says, is that "man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave."

From A Defence of Poetry

or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled "The Four Ages of Poetry"

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced; and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. The one¹ is the *to -poiein*,² or the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *to logizein*,³ or principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the Imagination": and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an /Eolian lyre,⁴ which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre. A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to

1. The imagination. "The other" (later in the sentence) is the reason.

2. Making. The Greek word from which the English term *poet* derives means "maker," and "maker" was often used as equivalent to "poet" by Renaissance critics such as Sir Philip Sidney in his

Defence of Poesy, which Shelley had carefully studied.

3. Calculating, reasoning.

4. A wind harp (see Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," p. 426).

the objects which delight a child, these expressions are, what poetry is to higher objects. The savage (for the savage is to ages what the child is to years) expresses the emotions produced in him by surrounding objects in a similar manner; and language and gesture, together with plastic or pictorial imitation, become the image of the combined effect of those objects, and of his apprehension of them. Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony. The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind. Hence men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions, distinct from that of the objects and the impressions represented by them, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds. But let us dismiss those more general considerations which might involve an enquiry into the principles of society itself, and restrict our view to the manner in which the imagination is expressed upon its forms.

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects. For there is a certain order or rhythm belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation, from which the hearer and the spectator receive an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other: the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste, by modern writers. Every man in the infancy of art, observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which this highest delight results: but the diversity is not sufficiently marked, as that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language

5. Sculptural.
6. Following, obeying.

7. Discernible.
8. I.e., abstract concepts.

will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world"—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of Poetry.

But Poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus have a double face of false and true. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons and the distinction of place are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry, and the choruses of Eschylus, and the book of Job, and Dante's Paradise would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did not forbid citation. The creations of sculpture, painting, and music, are illustrations still more decisive.

Language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonyme of the cause. But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from

9. Francis Bacons *The Advancement of Learning* 3.1.

1. A group of poems (e.g., "the Arthurian cycle") that deal with the same subject.

2. Here Shelley enlarges the scope of the term *poetry* to denote all the creative achievements, or imaginative breakthroughs, of humankind, including noninstitutional religious insights.

3. Roman god of beginnings and endings, often

represented by two heads facing opposite directions.

4. Sir Philip Sidney had pointed out, in his *Defence of Poesy*, that *votes*, the Roman term for "poet," signifies "a diviner, fore-seer, or Prophet."

5. I.e., restricted to specifically verbal poetry, as against the inclusive sense in which Shelley has been applying the term.

the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than colour, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the controul of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments and conditions of art, have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters and musicians, although the intrinsic powers of the great masters of these arts, may yield in no degree to that of those who have employed language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts, has never equalled that of poets in the restricted sense of the term; as two performers of equal skill will produce unequal effects from a guitar and a harp. The fame of legislators and founders of religions, so long as their institutions last, alone seems to exceed that of poets in the restricted sense; but it can scarcely be a question whether, if we deduct the celebrity which their flattery of the gross opinions of the vulgar usually conciliates, together with that which belonged to them in their higher character of poets, any excess will remain.

We have thus circumscribed the meaning of the word Poetry within the limits of that art which is the most familiar and the most perfect expression of the faculty itself. It is necessary however to make the circle still narrower, and to determine the distinction between measured and unmeasured language; for the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.

Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed or it will bear no flower—and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.⁶

An observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of this harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony of language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony which is its spirit, be observed. The practise is indeed convenient and popular, and to be preferred, especially in such composition as includes much form and action: but every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure

6. I.e., language, as opposed to the media of sculpture, painting, and music.

7. I.e., in meter versus in prose.

8. When the descendants of Noah, who spoke a single language, undertook to build the Tower of

Babel, which would reach heaven, God cut short the attempt by multiplying languages so that the builders could no longer communicate (see Genesis 11.1-9).

of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated.⁹ Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. Cicero sought to imitate the cadence of his periods but with little success. Lord Bacon was a poet.³ His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the hearer's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy. All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. Nor are those supreme poets, who have employed traditional forms of rhythm on account of the form and action of their subjects, less capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things, than those who have omitted that form. Shakespeare, Dante and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stript of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of Poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes⁴ have been called the moths of just history;⁵ they eat out the poetry of it. The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it be found in a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy,⁶ were poets; and although the plan of these writers, especially that of Livy, restrained them from developing this faculty in its highest

9. I.e., in what Shelley has already said.

1. Marcus Tullius Cicero, the great Roman orator of the 1st century B.C.E.

2. See the *Filium Labyrinthi* and the *Essay on Death* particularly [Shelley's note].

3. Abstracts, summaries.

4. Ry Racon in *The Advancement of Learning*

2.2.4.

5. Titus Livius (59 B.C.E.—17 C.E.) wrote an immense history of Rome. Herodotus (ca. 480—ca. 425 B.C.E.) wrote the first systematic history of Greece. Plutarch (ca. 46—ca. 120 C.E.) wrote *Parallel Lives* (of eminent Greeks and Romans).

degree, they make copious and ample amends for their subjection, by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images.

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed. Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector and Ulysses: the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to the depths in these immortal creations: the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected, that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch under names more or less specious has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled Image of unknown evil before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the antient armour or the modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature cannot be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendour; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music⁶ for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry⁷ rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral

6. The music made by the revolving crystalline spheres of the planets, inaudible to human ears.

7. In the preceding paragraph Shelley has been

implicitly dealing with the charge, voiced by Plato in his *Republic*, that poetry is immoral because it represents evil characters acting evilly.

improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But Poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A Poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign the glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal Poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

* # *

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense; the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow,

8. Moral philosophy.

9. Produces anew, re-creates.

1. Contentment.

2. Central to Shelley's theory is the concept (developed by 18th-century philosophers) of the sympathetic imagination—the faculty by which an individual is enabled to identify with the thoughts and feelings of others. Shelley insists that the faculty in poetry that enables us to share the joys and sufferings of invented characters is also the basis of all morality, for it compels us to feel for others as we feel for ourselves.

3. The "effect," or the explicit moral standards into which imaginative insights are translated at a particular time or place, is contrasted to the

"cause" of all morality, the imagination itself.

4. Tasso Torquato (1544-1595), Italian poet, author of *Jerusalem Delivered*, an epic poem about a crusade. Euripides (ca. 484–406 B.C.E.), Greek writer of tragedies. Lucan (39–65 C.E.), Roman poet, author of the *Pharsalia*.

5. Assumed, adopted.

6. In the following, omitted passage, Shelley reviews the history of drama and poetry in relation to civilization and morality and proceeds to refute the charge that poets are less useful than "reasoners and merchants." He begins by defining *utility* in terms of pleasure and then distinguishes between the lower (physical and material) and the higher (imaginative) pleasures.

terror, anguish, despair itself are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle; tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying, "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of mirth."⁷ Not that this highest species of pleasure is necessarily linked with pain. The delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry is often wholly unalloyed.

The production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are Poets or poetical philosophers.

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau,⁸ and their disciples, in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited, had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children, burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain.⁹ But it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of antient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the antient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we let "*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat i' the adage."¹ We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportion-

7. Ecclesiastes 7.2.

8. I follow the classification adopted by the author of *Four Ages of Poetry*. But Rousseau was essentially a poet. The others, even Voltaire, were mere reasoners [Shelley's note].

9. The Inquisition had been suspended following the Spanish Revolution of 1820, the year before

Shelley wrote this essay; it was not abolished permanently until 1834.

1. The words with which Lady Macbeth encourages her husband's ambition (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1.7.44-45).

2. Lack.

ally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? From what other cause has it arisen that these inventions which should have lightened, have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam? Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.³

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and the splendour of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship etc.—what were the scenery of this beautiful Universe which we inhabit—what were our consolations on this side of the grave—and what were our aspirations beyond it—if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar? Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. I appeal to the greatest Poets of the present day, whether it be not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connexion of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of con-

3. God says to Adam: "cursed is the ground for thy sake. . . . Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth. . . . In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground" (Genesis

3.17-19).

4. Matthew 6.24: "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

ventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself. For Milton conceived the *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the Muse having "dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song,"⁵ and let this be an answer to those who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the *Orlando Furioso*.⁶ Compositions so produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting. This instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts: a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest⁷ moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression: so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea, where the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility⁸ and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with these emotions; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a Universe. Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world; a word, or a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past. Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations⁹ of life, and veiling them or in language or in form sends them forth among mankind, bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide—abide, because there is no portal of expression from the caverns of the spirit which they inhabit into the universe of things. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold¹ the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient.

5. *Paradise Lost* 9.21–24.

6. The epic poem by the 16th-century Italian poet Ariosto, noted for his care in composition.

7. In the double sense of "most joyous" and "most apt or felicitous in invention."

8. Sensitivity, capacity for sympathetic feeling.

9. The dark intervals between the old and new moons.

1. Alchemists aimed to produce a drinkable ("potable") form of gold that would be an elixir of life, curing all diseases.

"The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."² But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.³ It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso: *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta*.⁴

A Poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men. As to his glory, let Time be challenged to declare whether the fame of any other institutor of human life be comparable to that of a poet. That he is the wisest, the happiest, and the best, inasmuch as he is a poet, is equally incontrovertible: the greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence, and, if we could look into the interior of their lives, the most fortunate of men: and the exceptions, as they regard those who possessed the poetic faculty in a high yet inferior degree, will be found on consideration to confirm rather than destroy the rule. Let us for a moment stoop to the arbitration of popular breath, and usurping and uniting in our own persons the incompatible characters of accuser, witness, judge and executioner, let us decide without trial, testimony, or form that certain motives of those who are "there sitting where we dare not soar"⁵ are reprehensible. Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a peculator, that Raphael was a libertine, that Spenser was a poet laureate.⁶ It is inconsistent with this division of our subject to cite living poets, but Posterity has done ample justice to the great names now referred to. Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins "were as scarlet, they are now white as snow";⁷ they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and the redeemer Time. Observe in what a ludicrous chaos the imputations of real or fictitious crime have been confused in the contemporary calumnies against poetry and poets;⁸ consider how little is, as it appears—or appears, as it is; look to your own motives, and judge not, lest ye be judged.⁹

Poetry, as has been said, in this respect differs from logic, that it is not

2. Satan's speech, *Paradise Lost* 1.254-55.

3. Shelley's version of a widespread Romantic doctrine that the poetic imagination transforms the familiar into the miraculous and re-creates the old world into a new world. See, e.g., Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, chap. 4: "To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar; . . . this is the character and privilege of genius" (p. 474).

4. "No one merits the name of Creator except God and the Poet." Quoted by Pierantonio Serassi in his *Life of Torquato Tasso* (1785).

5. Satan's scornful words to the angels who dis-

cover him after he has surreptitiously entered Eden: "Ye knew me once no mate / For you, sitting where ye durst not soar" (*Paradise Lost* 4.828-29).

6. Charges that had in fact been made against these men. The use of "poet laureate" as a derogatory term was a dig at Robert Southey, who held that honor at the time Shelley was writing. "Peculator": an embezzler of public money. Raphael is the 16th-century Italian painter.

7. Isaiah 1.18.

8. Shelley alludes especially to the charges of immorality by contemporary reviewers against Lord Byron and himself.

9. Christ's warning in Matthew 7.1.

subject to the controul of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will. It is presumptuous to determine that these' are the necessary conditions of all mental causation, when mental effects are experienced insusceptible of being referred to them. The frequent recurrence of the poetical power, it is obvious to suppose, may produce in the mind an habit of order and harmony correlative with its own nature and with its effects upon other minds. But in the intervals of inspiration, and they may be frequent without being durable, a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live. But as he is more delicately organized than other men, and sensible² to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them, he will avoid the one and pursue the other with an ardour proportioned to this difference. And he renders himself obnoxious to calumny,³ when he neglects to observe the circumstances under which these objects of universal pursuit and flight have disguised themselves in one another's garments.

But there is nothing necessarily evil in this error, and thus cruelty, envy, revenge, avarice, and the passions purely evil, have never formed any portion of the popular imputations on the lives of poets.

I have thought it most favourable to the cause of truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind, by a consideration of the subject itself, instead of following that of the treatise that excited me to make them public.⁴ Thus although devoid of the formality of a polemical reply; if the view they contain be just, they will be found to involve a refutation of the doctrines of the Four Ages of Poetry, so far at least as regards the first division of the subject. I can readily conjecture what should have moved the gall of the learned and intelligent author of that paper; I confess myself, like him, unwilling to be stunned by the Theseids of the hoarse Codri of the day. Bavius and Maevius⁵ undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable persons. But it belongs to a philosophical critic to distinguish rather than confound.

The first part of these remarks has related to Poetry in its elements and principles; and it has been shewn, as well as the narrow limits assigned them would permit, that what is called poetry, in a restricted sense, has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged, and which is poetry in an universal sense.

The second part⁶ will have for its object an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of Poetry, and a defence of the attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners and opinions, and compel them into a subordination to the imaginative and creative faculty. For the literature of

1. I.e., consciousness or will. Shelley again proposes that some mental processes are unconscious—outside our control or awareness.

2. I.e., sensitive to, conscious of. Cf. Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (p. 269): "What is a poet? . . . He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm, and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind."

3. Exposed to slander.

4. Peacock's "Four Ages of Poetry."

5. Would-be poets satirized by Virgil and Horace. "Theseids": epic poems about Theseus. Codrus (plural "Codri") was the Roman author of a long, dull *Thieseid* attacked by Juvenal and others. In 1794 and 1795 the conservative critic William Gifford had borrowed from Virgil and Horace and published the *Baviad* and the *Maeviad*, hard-hitting and highly influential satires on popular poetry and drama.

6. Shelley, however, completed only the first part.

England, an energetic developement of which has ever preceded or accompanied a great and free developement of the national will, has arisen as it were from a new birth. In spite of the low-thoughted envy which would undervalue contemporary merit, our own will be a memorable age in intellectual achievements, and we live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty. The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

1821

1840

7. In the age of Milton and the English Civil Wars.
8. Priests who are expositors of sacred mysteries.

9. Aristotle had said that God is the "Unmoved Mover" of the universe.

JOHN CLARE

1793-1864

Since the mid-eighteenth century, when critics had begun to worry that the authentic vigor of poetry was being undermined in their age of modern learning and refinement, they had looked for untaught primitive geniuses among the nation's peasantry. In the early-nineteenth-century literary scene, John Clare was the nearest thing to a "natural poet" there was. An earlier and greater peasant poet, Robert Burns, had managed to acquire a solid liberal education. Clare, however, was born at Helpston, a Northamptonshire village, the son of a field laborer and a mother who was entirely illiterate, and he obtained only enough schooling to enable him to read and write. Although he was a sickly and fearful child, he had to work hard in the field, where he found himself composing verse "for downright pleasure in giving vent to my feelings." The fragments of an autobiography that he wrote later in life describe movingly, and with humor, the stratagems that as a young man he devised in order to find the time and the materials for writing. A blank notebook could cost him a week's wages. In 1820 publication of his *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* attracted critical attention, and on a trip to London, he was made much of by leading writers of the day.