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Author(s): John C. Bean

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The Poet Borne Darkly: The Dream-Voyage Allegory in Shelley's *Alastor*

JOHN C. BEAN

A *LASTOR*; or the Spirit of Solitude has been the subject of more critical articles than any other single poem of Shelley's; yet today, I suspect, few scholars would willingly argue that the poem is successful or even reasonably intelligible. The cruxes in the poem are many, but those most frequently disputed may be briefly summarized. According to Shelley's preface, *Alastor* is to reveal the story of an otherwise noble and generous youth whose solitude neglects to include one essential element in life, love. The result of this omission is "self-centered seclusion," for which the poet is apparently punished "by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to a speedy ruin."¹ The punishment theme is also implicit in the title, "Alastor" (a Greek word meaning "evil genius") being adopted by Shelley because the "poem treated the spirit of solitude as a spirit of evil."² *Alastor*, then, is presumably to be a warning against leading a life without love. Yet a close examination of the poem itself suggests that the Alastor-as-avenging-genius theme is almost nonexistent; the poet does not seem to be punished for pursuing the dream-maiden nor does solitude seem evil. Rather, solitude leads to heroism, for the poet is praised in the poem's conclusion as an exemplar for other men. Criticism of *Alastor* has generally focused, therefore, on two related issues: (1) the relationship between the preface and the poem, specifically whether the poet is punished for his neglect of human love or praised for his pursuit of ideal love; and (2) the symbolic meaning of the dream-maiden,

1. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1905; rpt. 1960). Hereafter line numbers in parentheses in the text will refer to this edition.

2. The words are Thomas Peacock's, who suggested the title to Shelley. Quoted by Raymond D. Havens, "Shelley's *Alastor*," *PMLA*, 45 (1930), 1101.

whether she is the poet's idealized conception of a perfect *human* maiden, or a projection of some aspect of the poet's inner soul, or a symbol for the ideal world itself.

But the critical debate has been characterized by a curious fact: the poet's dream-voyage from the "lone Chorasman shore" (line 272) to the "silent nook" (line 572) where he dies, have been consistently disregarded. R. D. Havens dismissed the whole voyage as confusedly written and irrelevant to any of the poem's themes—mere "pictures of nature for their own sake"—and Seymour Reiter has condemned the voyage as "the radical fault of the poem."³ Only two critics have examined the voyage in detail;⁴ the remaining critics of *Alastor* have apparently considered the voyage unessential to the meaning of the poem, for they have focused their attention almost exclusively on the preface and the first 200 lines. The neglect of the voyage can be attributed, I believe, to the mistaken assumption that *Alastor* is somehow a poem about love. Since the dream-maiden virtually disappears from the last half of the poem, and since the poet's wanderings say little either literally or allegorically about the poet's feelings for her, the dream-voyage is admittedly irrelevant to that issue. It is my contention here, however, that the unifying theme of *Alastor* is not the poet's quest for love but his quest for spiritual knowledge and that the function of the dream-voyage is to define the limits of human knowledge by describing allegorically a poet's fate. In the following pages I hope to demonstrate that the dream-voyage is a carefully constructed, thematically relevant allegory, essential to our clear understanding of the poem and to our appreciation of the skill and the artistic maturity of the early Shelley.

When the poet-hero boards his shallop to meet "lone Death" (line 305),

3. Havens, "Shelley's *Alastor*," p. 1109; Seymour Reiter, *A Study of Shelley's Poetry* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967), p. 16.

4. Evan K. Gibson, "Alastor: a Reinterpretation," *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 1022-45; and William H. Hildebrand, *A Study of Alastor*, Kent State University Bulletin, Research Series II (Kent, Ohio, 1954). Gibson attempts to account for *Alastor* line by line, image by image, and his interpretation is genuinely helpful. He believes the dream-voyage is an allegorical journey into the realm of death to discover what resides there: immortality or annihilation. The confusing landscapes, according to Gibson, are used expressionistically to symbolize the poet's state of mind as it alternates between hope and despair. Hildebrand repeats some of Gibson's argument, but he seems interested mainly in establishing sources for the journey and in tracing all the place names on ancient maps. A third critic, Harold L. Hoffman, *An Odyssey of the Soul: Shelley's Alastor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), examines the sources of Shelley's imagery in the dream-voyage, but his interpretation of the voyage itself involves little more than paraphrase. Other critics, of course, have mentioned the voyage in passing, but none have attempted an explication.

he is still searching, as most critics agree, for his dream-maiden. What has not been appreciated, however, is that the poet's quest for his lover is a continuation of his earlier quest for knowledge, for to possess the dream-maiden is to possess direct secrets of the intangible world. No one will deny, of course, that the search for knowledge is the poem's initial theme and that Shelley emphasizes its importance by describing it in the experience of both the narrator and the poet-hero, but it is generally assumed to end at line 128 when the poet discovers the "thrilling secrets of the birth of time" and turns thereafter, supposedly, from knowledge to love. Yet an examination of the rest of the poem suggests that the poet's quest for knowledge is not completed. The poet we see in the dream-voyage section possesses no extraordinary wisdom. His journey unfolds against a universe that is mysterious and inscrutable. Its mountains are shrouded by mists, its valleys by shadow. Its waters are "unfathomable" (line 373), or "searchless" (line 507), or "inaccessibly profound" (line 503), and when they act as mirrors they are often "treacherous" (line 386), distorting what they reflect. The omnipotent wind, which dominates the dream-voyage section, can seem either benevolent or terrible—at times the gentle breath of the Great Parent, at other times the indifferent blast of blind necessity. The numerous reflecting pools which recur throughout the journey seem to offer alternately the promise of the rainbow clouds reflected on their surface and the threat of their black and watery depths. The poet's ignorance is made explicit when, in his own voice, he questions the meaning of his life and the permanence of his creative soul:

"O stream!
 Whose source is inaccessibly profound,

 the wide sky,
 And measureless ocean may declare as soon
 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!"
 (lines 502–503, 508–514)

Far from possessing supernatural secrets, the poet is still seeking them as he begins his strange sea-journey.

What has happened in the poem is that for the poet the meaning of knowl-

edge changes after the appearance of the dream-maiden.⁵ Early in the poem, in the experience of both the narrator and the poet-hero, the search for knowledge is commensurate with a love for earthly beauty. Nature is a teacher, benevolent, and inscrutable, but eternally suggestive of spiritual realities just beyond man's reach. The relationship between man and nature is essentially that of the earlier English Romantics, especially Wordsworth, for whom spiritual experience means pious communion with the visible universe. Thus, although the narrator never pierces nature's "inmost sanctuary" (line 38), he senses enough of her spirit to remain content with "murmurs of the air, / And motions of the forests and the sea" (lines 46-47). The example of the narrator is apparently for Shelley the point of balance, where man recognizes and accepts the limits of his imperfect nature and is content to find in the physical world intimations of spiritual realities. Like the narrator, the poet-hero at first finds "joy and exultation" (line 144) in revelations of external nature and is satisfied with his expanding knowledge of human learning and earthly beauty. Until the appearance of his dream-maiden, "the varying roof of heaven / And the green earth [had never lost] in his heart its claims / To love and wonder" (lines 96-98). But the dream-maiden appears to the poet, or at least so he hopes, as a direct revelation from the spiritual world, a revelation passionate, ideal, and complete, without the imperfect intermediary of nature. From this moment on the physical universe loses for the poet its meaning.

His wan eyes
Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly
As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.
(lines 200-202)

Nature becomes for the poet now a distracting phantasm, uninformed by spirit, often deceptive and treacherous. The loss of the safe Wordsworthian vision is the poem's crisis, for the poet, no longer satisfied with indirect intimations of the invisible world, longs for direct mystical union.

One result of the shift in the approach to spiritual knowledge may be the introduction into the poem of sexual metaphor, and *Alastor* may therefore

5. In the paragraph that follows, I am indebted to the argument of Albert S. Gérard, "The Hopeless Quest," *English Romantic Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 136-162. Gérard is an exception to my claim that most critics have seen love as the central theme of *Alastor*. He has argued persuasively that the theme of the poem derives from Shelley's perplexity at having to choose between the indirect or Wordsworthian approach to knowledge, which he finds unsatisfactory, and the direct mystical approach, which he finds impossible to achieve. Gérard's essay gives a much fuller account of these matters than I do here.

belong to a paradoxical tradition of mystic writing in which spiritual desire is expressed in the language of sexual passion.⁶ In the Wordsworthian or pantheistic approach to knowledge, the wind harp is a suitable metaphor for the relationship between man and the divine (see lines 41–45 where the narrator becomes a “lyre”); the mortal instrument and the supernatural inspiration remain distinct and unmingled. But the mystic demands fusion, the direct union of finite and infinite, and takes as his metaphor the sexual act. Thus, the relationship between knowledge and love in *Alastor* is necessarily complex, and the arguments of critics about whether eros or idealism is the major theme are not readily resolvable. For whatever reasons we may assign, Shelley’s poem, after the appearance of the dream-maiden, in its insistence on sexual metaphor and its fascination with death, reveals a mysticism darker and more Germanic than the pantheism of the English Lake poets. The poet-hero’s driving impulse is his longing for direct union with the supernatural. Shelley’s intention in the dream-voyage is to elaborate in allegory the themes he has already developed.

The dream-voyage itself can be best understood by dividing the poet’s wanderings into four parts: (1) the sea-crossing in the shallop (lines 299–419); (2) the scene in the secluded forest or “musical woods” (lines 420–492); (3) the journey down the stream which “images” the poet’s life (lines 493–570); and (4) the poet’s death in the “silent nook” (lines 571–671). What critics have overlooked is that the second section, the musical woods, is not simply a fine description of nature, but a description of nature made timeless and ideal. It is an allegory of the poet’s vision, and the first section, the sea-crossing, is an allegory of the mystic experience which arrives at vision. The first two sections reveal one pole of the romantic mind; the longing for transcendent unity, the impulse toward the absolute. The third section, the journey down the stream, illustrates the poet’s awareness of human finitude and earthly disharmony. It is the other pole of the romantic mind that tends angrily toward nihilism and despair. The final section, the silent “nook,” brings both moods into a tentative, uneasy balance, reaffirming the sense of mystery and ambiguity in the poet’s quest.

The beginning of the sea-journey is marked by a sudden change in the poet’s mood. Before boarding the shallop, while pursuing his dream-maiden

6. For a historical study of the relationship between mysticism and eroticism, and for an attempt to account for the strangeness of this phenomenon, see Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (1956; rpt. New York: Fawcett World Library, 1966).

feverishly about the Middle East, the poet alternates between “dizzying anguish” (line 231) and sluggish melancholy (see the imagery in lines 272–276), but once at sea, under the influence of the wind, he becomes “calm and rejoicing” (line 326). The poet’s change of mood is foreshadowed early in the poem by a similar experience of the narrator, who pursues the secrets of nature like a “desperate alchymist” (line 31) until he too submits to the wind and becomes passive:

that serenely now
And moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre . . .
I wait thy breath, Great Parent.
(lines 41–45)

In both instances the movement from despair to tranquility is marked by a rising wind. In a discussion of wind imagery in romantic poetry, M. H. Abrams has explained that a “rising wind . . . [often] serves as the vehicle for a complex subjective event: . . . the renewal of life and emotional vigor after apathy and spiritual torpor, and an outburst of creative inspiration following a period of sterility.”⁷ The linking together of wind, emotional renewal, and creative inspiration, as Abrams has described, is literally observable in the case of the narrator, who becomes like a wind harp and sings the poet’s story. Shelley intends the poet’s sea-crossing, I believe, to be an allegory of the same creative experience. Like the narrator turned wind harp, when the poet boards his shallop he submits himself to the direction of the wind—to a force outside of and greater than himself—and is henceforth passive. But in the romantic analogy of wind harp to creative imagination, the poet is not completely passive; he must actively modulate the strings to produce harmony so that the poem becomes, in Abrams’ terms, a “reciprocation of external and internal elements.”⁸ Although the poet-hero never rows his shallop (which would disturb the motive influence of the wind), neither is he completely passive. He spreads his cloak aloft as a sail and “following his eager soul” (line 311) sits “Calm and rejoicing in the fearful war . . . / Holding the steady helm” (lines 326, 333). What I am suggesting is that the poet-hero, while actively steering the wind-driven shallop, is analogous to the poet as wind harp and that both are analogous to the creative imagination modulating divine breath. The sea-crossing justifies the narrator’s later assertion that the poet-hero is a “fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings / The breath of

7. M. H. Abrams, “The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor,” *Kenyon Review*, 19 (1957), 113–114.

8. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Norton Library, 1958), p. 51.

heaven did wander” (lines 667–668). We never see him as a “fragile lute” because the wind harp metaphor has few possibilities for development in allegory. But the sailboat is exactly suited for Shelley’s purpose, which is to describe the poet’s communion with the divine as dangerous and heroic.

It should be noted that Shelley has used the sailboat metaphor elsewhere as a symbol for mystic experience. In the last great stanza of *Adonais*, for example, the poet arrives at vision by sailing toward “the inmost veil of Heaven,” exactly as the *Alastor* poet wishes to do.

The breath whose might I have invoked in song
 Descends on me; my spirit’s bark is driven,
 Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
 The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!
 I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
 Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
 The soul of Adonais, like a star,
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.⁹

(*Adonais*, LV.487–495)

It is dangerous but heroic business, Shelley suggests here, to open one’s sails to the wind, leaving the trembling throng and striving for the divine. As Shelley’s preface to *Alastor* suggests, poets are the “luminaries of the world” whose “too exquisite a perception” separates them from the meaner spirits who crawl like worms upon the earth. The poet is borne darkly because he is forever dissatisfied with the confusion and wretchedness of earthly life. Striving to discover the eternal by releasing himself from time and place, he courts despair and in his deepest moments looks triumphantly toward death. But he is heroic too by that measure in which he transcends disharmony and feels the divine. Like the poet in *Adonais*, who sails far enough to see lights beaming “from the abode where the Eternal are,” the *Alastor* poet, while actively steering his shallop, travels “beyond all human speed” (line 361) and seems to become an “elemental god” (line 351). Nature itself defies natural law as a *rising*

9. Nor has Shelley invented the boat metaphor out of his love for sailing. The image occurs frequently enough in mystical writing to be archetypal. Denis de Rougemont, for example, has this to say about the mystic implications of the Tristan and Isolde myth: “Let me suggest a rough parallel between what happens to Tristan and a properly mystical experience. . . . After being wounded in overcoming the Morholt, Tristan has himself put on board a boat with neither sail nor oar. He has only his sword and harp. The boat is cast adrift. . . . *This is the very model of a yielding up to the influence of the supernatural at the beginning of a mystical experience*” (*Love in the Western World*, p. 151; italics mine).

whirlpool lifts the poet from a subterranean cavern to the musical woods—his one vision of an archetypal paradise.

But the dream-voyage may also be allegorical of the second metaphor for mystic experience—sexual orgasm—which Shelley used so startlingly in the poet's original dream-vision. The poet's aspiration to know the spiritual world directly cannot be completely satisfied with the relationship between man and spirit described in the wind harp or sailboat metaphor. By demanding immediate reunion with his dream-maiden and by seeking that reunion in death, Shelley's poet embarks on a more passionate quest, where death, erotically envisioned, leads to ecstatic union with the supernatural. The sea-journey begins ominously as the poet moves toward blackness and annihilation:

In the fearful war
Of wave ruining on wave, and blast on blast
Descending, and black flood on whirlpool driven
With dark obliterating course, he sate.
(lines 326–329)

From here onward the poet's death-longing is charged with an insistent erotic energy. One could resort to Freud, if one had to, for an explanation of the voyage's sexual meaning—the descent by water into a dark winding cavern and the sudden phallic liberation as a swirling whirlpool lifts the poet's boat skyward. But we do not need Freud to recognize the eroticism of the sea-journey, just as we do not need him to feel the sexuality of the "Liebestod" in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. For Shelley, the erotic feeling is in the spiraling rhythm of the poet's progress, the alternate straining and relaxing of the boat, the ebbing and flowing of surging water. Engulfed in "whirlpools and the waves / Bursting and eddying irresistibly" (lines 355–356), the boat moves with "unrelaxing speed" (line 366) into the "winding depths" (line 364) of a cavern. The tension relaxes momentarily when the poet pursues the underground passageway, but it begins to mount in a spiraling crescendo as the boat spins upward "stair above stair" (line 380) "circling immeasurably fast" (line 381) out of the cavern. At the moment of crisis the movement of the boat becomes unmistakably orgasmic:

Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,
Till on the verge of the extremest curve,

Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,
 The waters overflow . . .
 the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink
 Down the abyss?
 (lines 387–395)

This is a daring image: the sailboat shuddering at the “extremest curve” of the water, at the brink of the abyss. I suggest the possibility that Shelley intended the shuddering sailboat to be an allegory of sexual orgasm, or more properly, of that visionary moment, ecstatic, self-obliterating, transcendent, that mystic poets have frequently described as sexual orgasm. In any case, the equation here of orgasmic imagery and death (the “abyss”) gives a deeper and more urgent meaning to the poet’s first dream-vision and suggests again that the central issue in *Alastor* is the poet’s desire to know the invisible world directly. The dream-voyage, using the sailboat rather than the wind harp to suggest the poet’s correspondence with divine breath and possibly using the boat’s spiraling movement and its final shuddering to suggest the erotic energy behind the poet’s quest, recapitulates in allegory the poet-hero’s attempt to achieve union with the divine. Marked throughout by surging sexual rhythms, the voyage begins with a joyful and exhilarating communion with the wind and culminates in a vision of the timeless and ideal.

At the climactic moment the poet’s shallop is saved from the abyss by a gentle wind which blows it into a secluded cove. The surging tension of the sea-journey gives way now to the relaxing afterglow of “gentle motion” (line 399), a “placid stream” (line 400), a “woven grove” (line 401), and breezes “murmuring in the musical woods” (line 403). The description of nature in the ensuing forest scene reveals a world timeless and ideal. One can best appreciate Shelley’s intentions by comparing the musical woods with an earlier view of nature. Here, for example, is the narrator’s opening invocation:

Earth, ocean, air, belovèd brotherhood!
 If our great Mother has imbued my soul
 With aught of natural piety to feel
 Your love, and recompense the boon with mine;
 If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,
 With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,
 And solemn midnight’s tingling silentness;
 If autumn’s hollow sighs in the sere wood,
 And winter robing with pure snow and crowns
 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
And cherished these my kindred; then forgive
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw
No portion of your wonted favour now!

(lines 1-17)

Although nature here is beautiful, the narrator's view is clearly human. He senses the presence of a "great Mother" but he knows only the multiplicity of "earth, ocean, air," and in the lines about his not injuring his fellow creatures, there is an uneasy hint of discord. He must praise each season in turn; he can't speak of winter in terms of spring, nor night in terms of day. His world is fragmented, locked in cyclical time.

In the musical woods, however, nature is ideal:

Like restless serpents, clothed
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,
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
Uniting their close union; the woven leaves
Make net-work of the dark blue light of day,
And the night's noontide clearness.

Through the dell,
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,
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,
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.
 (lines 438–447, 454–468)

Here the eroticism of the poet's first dream-vision and the sexual rhythms of the sea-crossing are purified and ordered by the images of familyhood and joyful procreation. All of nature—serpents, parasites, blossoms, trees—perform the human sacrament of spiritual marriage and sexual love, and the innocence of "gamesome infants" suggests fruitfulness and prelapsarian bliss. In the lines 446–447 ("the dark blue light of day, / And the night's noontide clearness") there is a startling fusion of time, as there is again when Silence and Twilight keep their noontday watch among the shades. And the whole last section, with its drowsy painted birds, its gorgeous insects floating motionless, and its distortionless liquid mirror, seems the work of a divine artist, painting from beyond the realms of time.

Whether the ideal world glimpsed in the forest is an illusion or actually awaits the poet after death is beyond his mortal knowing. The hero envisions it, however, only after crossing the ocean at the helm of his shallop. Once he arrives the woods do not welcome him—

The wave
 Of the boat's motion marred their [the flowers] pensive task,
 Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind . . .
 Had e'er disturbed before
 (lines 408–412)

and he is made to seem an intruder—

He heard
 The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung
 Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel
 An unaccustomed presence.
 (lines 474–477)

Despite the prolific beauties of nature in the ideal forest, the poet remains without a sexual partner, pensive and alone. Shelley's allegorical intentions are clear. The musical woods are merely a temporary vision achieved heroically and at risk, but they do not offer the poet the mystic union he longs for. Shelley now repeats, this time in allegory, the poem's central crisis—the necessity of choosing between the indirect Wordsworthian approach to knowledge, which turns man's spiritual quest outward toward nature, and the direct mystical approach, which excludes nature and focuses on self.

A Spirit seemed
 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,
 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,
 Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,
 And seemed with their serene and azure smiles
 To beckon him.

(lines 479–492; ellipses are in the original)¹⁰

The poet is tempted by a spirit (who seems to be the Spirit of Nature, the Mother of this unfathomable world) to return to his former communion with the visible shapes of the universe. But the beckoning eyes of his dream-*maiden* lure him back to his quest for direct, mystical union. The allegory has thus far defined, then, what Shelley understands as the limits of a poet's earthly power—occasional intimations of spiritual reality, limited and imperfect, but powerful enough to separate poets from ordinary mortals. By demanding knowledge of the spiritual world beyond these limits, by refusing to accept man's fate as the narrator earlier accepts it, the poet-hero succumbs to "self-centered seclusion" and is driven to a speedy ruin.

The next section of the dream-voyage, the journey down the stream which "images" the poet's life, is an allegory of life as it is actually experienced, fragmented and timebound; it is the allegory of knowledge empirically known. It begins abruptly after the last vision of timelessness in the musical woods.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld
 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.

(lines 469–474)

10. Gérard has noted the significance of this passage in relation to the two approaches to knowledge (*English Romantic Poetry*, p. 142).

The poet views death here with none of the triumphant, erotic expectation that characterized his earlier vision. Death now is simply an empty void, the treacherous end of an unfulfilled life. The sudden movement from ideal time to linear time suggests how consciously Shelley has structured the dream-voyage. In the first two sections of the voyage the poet, "like an elemental god," travels by boat *uphill* to the musical woods. When the poet leaves the woods he is no longer godlike. He travels on foot (his creative posture abandoned) following the stream of his life *downhill* and dies in a silent nook. The stream of his life begins in the ideal forest, bubbling out of a fountain that is "inaccessibly profound" (line 503). It proceeds "like childhood laughing as it went" (line 499) until the landscape becomes sparse and the poet finds himself suddenly aged (lines 532ff.). The musical woods give way to the "gnarled roots of ancient pines" (line 530) and the "black gulfs and yawning caves" (line 548) crying forth with "ten thousand various tongues / To the loud stream" (lines 549–550). The promise of perfection in the ideal is now countered by the actuality of imperfection and ugliness. If the poet's quest has been for unity, the stream reveals that his life moves irrevocably toward disintegration. The wind harp's initial promise of harmony between man and the divine is finally mocked by an ancient pine:

A pine,
 Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy
 Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast
 Yielding one only response, at each pause
 In most familiar cadence, with the howl
 The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams
 Mingling its solemn song.
 (lines 561–567)

The hiss of homeless streams is Shelley's nihilistic voice: the pine, as discordant wind harp, howls forth Shelley's knowledge of ugliness and disorder, of "the lasting misery and loneliness of the world" (preface), which continually threatens his idealistic vision. The howling streams offer additional evidence of what recent scholarship has come to insist about Shelley: that he is not simply a blithe visionary, that his idealism is tempered by a profound and disturbing skepticism.¹¹ Thus Shelley carefully constructs his allegory to re-

11. See C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); and Newell F. Ford, "Paradox and Irony in Shelley's Poetry," *Studies in Philology*, 57 (1960), 649–662.

veal the contradiction between the poet's possibly illusory idealism and the implacable realities of life. The poet's voyage to the musical woods is the poet's aspiration for the spiritual Oneness which would transcend the earthly disharmony revealed symbolically by the disintegrating stream.

Had the poem ended with the thousand-tongued waterfall, it would have emphasized finally Shelley's nihilism and despair. But the rocks and the plunging water are not all so that the last section of Shelley's allegory—the poet's death in the silent nook—reaffirms the mystery and inscrutability which has always characterized the poet's quest. In the silent nook, a "tranquil spot" (line 577) in "the lap of horror" (line 578), the ambiguous and alternating images of immortality and annihilation recur. Like the ideal forest, the silent nook has its hints of benevolent nature and of childhood and wedded bliss:

Ivy clasped
The fissured stones with its entwining arms,
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 . . .
(lines 578–584)

The poet had been led to the nook, we learn (and here the imagery again recalls the gentle breath of a benevolent parent), by "even that voice / Which hither came, floating among the winds" (lines 591–592). The identity of the voice is uncertain. It could be the voice of the dream-maiden whose vision the poet has been following all along but who has formerly been identified by eyes. Or it could be the voice of Ruin who appears a few lines later. Either interpretation is possible for Shelley's point by now is the inscrutability of the world beyond the veil. Whether he is led "by love, or dream, or god, or mightier Death" (line 428) is simply beyond the poet's knowing. The twin sisters Silence and Twilight, who inhabit the ideal forest, are replaced in the silent nook by the brothers Ruin and Death—evidence enough of cosmic treachery. Yet in the nook the poet seems for the first time to reach some kind of understanding. Now that "hope and despair, / The torturers" (lines 639–40) sleep, he is "passive" (line 630), "at peace, and faintly smiling" (line 645). Lying before him are the beautiful, mist-laden landscapes (lines 553–559) which still suggest the lands beyond human knowledge, but he seems to turn his mind inward, resigning his soul to the "majestic past" (line 629) instead of the inscrutable future. Although the poet has seen the ideal forest,

he recognizes that man in his human form is alien there. There is hope, perhaps, but no promise of an ideal world beyond what the poet himself creates. All that seems knowable is that the waters of this life pass into the void homeless and howling.

It is on this sense of ambiguity that the allegory ends. The poet's life has moved from initial joy at the possibilities of knowledge and happiness in the physical world to rapid disintegration after the appearance of the dream-maiden. We might ask at this time if the poem bears out that controversial assertion of the preface: "The Poet's self-centered seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin." There can be little doubt of the poet's "irresistible passion" or of his "speedy ruin." But the phrase "self-centered seclusion" has occasioned much of the heated debate about the poem's meaning. Critics who have supposed that "self-centered" means "selfish," and thus indicates a moral condemnation of the poet's neglect of human love, are puzzled to find little evidence of such condemnation in the poem. E. K. Gibson is forced to argue that the poet's neglect is innocent and more than balanced by his generosity and courage. A. E. Dubois and W. H. Hildebrand resort to the theory that solitude is immediately malign but ultimately benign. Carlos Baker believes simply that Shelley didn't understand his own poem.¹² A proper understanding of the dream-voyage, however, and hence of the continuing importance of the theme of knowledge, suggests that the term "self-centered" is ethically neutral and refers simply to the poet's exclusive focus on self, his rejection of the physical universe after the appearance of the dream-maiden. The preface and the poem together warn that the self-absorbing idealism that blinds man to his fellows and to his earthly home leads without exception to frustration, disappointment, and early death. As the only sane alternative between the ill fate of the poet and the perniciousness of the "unforeseeing multitudes" (preface), Shelley seems to recommend the example of the narrator, who accepts man's limited condition and his spiritual kinship with nature. If Shelley himself is to be identified with any of the characters in his poem, it is the narrator, I suspect, rather than the poet-hero.¹³

12. Gibson, "Alastor: a Reinterpretation"; Arthur E. Dubois, "Alastor: the Spirit of Solitude," *JEGP*, 35 (1936), 530-545; Hildebrand, *A Study of Alastor*; Carlos Baker, "The Necessity of Love: Alastor and the Epipsyche," *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), pp. 41-60.

13. Several critics have read *Alastor* autobiographically, identifying Shelley with the poet-hero. Perhaps the most recent is Seymour Reiter, *A Study of Shelley's Poetry*. But see also Havens, "Shelley's Alastor," and Newman Ivey White, *Portrait of Shelley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

Yet in exploring the dangers of extreme idealism, *Alastor* points to no easy solutions, for the narrator's position is hardly adequate either. The narrator cannot be a model for earthly happiness because the poet's story brings him to "pale despair" (line 718). Despite his initial praise of the beauties of earth and his filial piety for his visible surroundings, the narrator's final emphasis is on a universe incomplete and unsatisfactory. He gives no promise of the poet's fulfillment after death, nor does he immortalize the poet by allowing his pattern to merge with the perennial cycles of nature. The fact is, within the limits of the narrator's focus, the poet and nature die together. The moon sinks, carrying with it the unattainable eyes of his dream-maiden, and darkness prevails:

But when heaven remained
Utterly black, the murky shades involved
An image, silent, cold, and motionless,
As their own voiceless earth and vacant air.
(lines 659–662)

The narrator's vision of cyclical time in his joyous opening invocation gives way now to a vision of nature frozen and dying. The poet's death brings eternal winter, apparently; spring remains in "Medea's wondrous alchemy" (line 672) which now seems forever beyond mortal reach. It is finally not the poet whom the poem decries, but the laws of this world which have doomed his quest to failure:

O, that the dream
Of dark magician in his visioned cave,
Raking the cinders of a crucible
For life and power, even when his feeble hand
Shakes in its last decay, were the true law
Of this so lovely world!
(lines 681–686)

For the narrator, the poet becomes at the last "some surpassing Spirit, / Whose light adorned the world around it" (lines 714–715) and his loss, "too 'deep for tears'" (line 713) brings "pale despair and cold tranquillity" (line 718). The poet is finally a symbol of man's heroic longing for the transcendent ideal, and yet a warning to those who would seek it. Poets borne too darkly across the waters, it seems, leave behind not only the trembling throng but also the companionship of the earth and of sweet human love. Yet those who try to exist on earthly beauty and human love alone, as the narrator apparently must force himself to do, are struck by the emptiness of the scene, by

the certainty that "Nature's vast frame, the web of human things . . . are not as they were" (lines 719–720).

Shelley's *Alastor* is haunted to the end by the misery of man's existence in a universe hostile to his impulse for perfection and unity. The poet's dream-voyage is essential to the poem because it reveals Shelley's vision of what poets can achieve in such a world. By tracing the poet's quest for mystic knowledge to its inevitable conclusion of disappointment and death, the dream-voyage accomplishes the poem's didactic purpose which is to show that extreme idealism leads to ruin, no matter how admirable we think the poet's quest may be. But in the process, the voyage reveals allegorically Shelley's whole sense of a poet's fate—his heroic but imperfect communion with the divine, his agonizing awareness of disorder, his ambiguous death. If the poet's journey still seems a bewildering maze of shifting symbols and whirling landscapes, we can attribute the confusion not to what Havens contends was Shelley's lack of "a single, dominating purpose,"¹⁴ but to the complexity of his purpose. Whether or not we find the dream-voyage allegory artistically successful, we must conclude that Shelley planned it carefully and that he knew throughout precisely what he was doing. He attempted too much, perhaps, but once we see his plan we can no longer accuse him, at this early stage of his career, of blithe disregard for structure and meaning, of mere fondness for scenery and pretty words.

College of Great Falls

14. Havens, p. 1109.