

Author, Narrator, and Hero in Shelley's *Alastor*

NORMAN THURSTON

WE still have problems with *Alastor* and with the Preface to *Alastor*. It is only in the last twenty-five years or so, especially since the publication of Evan K. Gibson's article on *Alastor*,¹ that critics have begun to ask answerable questions of the poem.

And it is only since the recent publication of Earl R. Wasserman's fine book on Shelley² that the answers to those questions have been synthesized into anything like a satisfactory reading. In the following essay I shall be building squarely on such recent criticism of the poem in order to approach two of the capital difficulties still remaining—the relevance of the last half of the poem, and the relation between the poem and Shelley's oddly misleading Preface.

The greatest advance in our understanding of *Alastor* has come with the growing realization that Shelley's narrator is not perfectly in sympathy with Shelley's hero.³ In fact we have come to see that the real dramatic interest of the poem consists in the ironies of an implied dialogue between two related but divergent points of view. If, as I shall suggest, we go on to add still a third consideration—the unifying intelligence which we call Shelley and identify with the writer of the Preface—then the situation becomes even more complex. We are obliged to read *Alastor* with the constant awareness that the hero of the poem (who reveals himself in his actions) is not at all the same as the narrator (who reveals himself in his attitudes towards those actions), and that neither narrator nor hero is at all the same as the author (who, except for a dangerously misleading Preface, reveals himself hardly at all).

1. "Alastor: A Reinterpretation," *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 1022-45.

2. *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971).

3. Gibson (p. 1044) begins the process of discrimination by rejecting the traditional identification of Shelley with his hero. Albert Gerard, "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solipsism," *PQ*, 33 (1954), esp. pp. 166-67, clarifies the distinction between hero and narrator by characterizing the narrator's point of view with considerable precision. (See also Glenn O'Malley, "Shelley's 'Air-prism': The Synesthetic Scheme of *Alastor*," *MP*, 55 [1958], p. 182.) The distinction between narrator and hero is of central importance to Wasserman's appreciation of the poem's intellectual irony—see esp. pp. 15, 34-36.

Bearing these distinctions in mind, I want to ask the following questions of the poem: what does the Poet want? what kind of world does he move in? what kinds of satisfaction does it give him? from what point of view does the narrator look at the Poet? how far does he sympathize with the Poet? how far is he critical of the Poet? what, if anything, does he learn by telling the Poet's story? I intend to examine the relationship between Poet and narrator at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the poem. And then finally, since Shelley wrote the Preface, published it, and (we must therefore assume) intended it to be there, I want to open the question of the author's attitude towards his own poem, hoping that if we use the poem to shed light on the Preface, rather than the other way around, we may begin to understand Shelley's position more precisely.

Most criticism of *Alastor* focuses directly on the center of the poem—on the problematical triptych of episodes comprising the story of the Arab maiden, the description of the Poet's vision, and the narrator's comments on the Poet's vision (ll. 129-205). For here, if anywhere, we ought to find some confirmation of the moral which the Preface has apparently led us to expect. Doesn't the maiden bring food to the Poet, make his bed, neglect her duties to attend him? Doesn't the Poet ignore her shamefully? Subsequently doesn't the narrator say that the Poet's vision (which follows hard on the heels of this rejection) is sent by the "spirit of sweet human love," presumably as a punishment, because the Poet had "spurned / Her choicest gifts"? If we add cause to effect, don't we have the substance of Shelley's moral: that "the Poet's self-centered seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin"?

In fact, if we add this cause to this effect, we get a specious explanation for the episode of the Arab maiden—and nothing but trouble everywhere else.⁴ We turn the hero of the poem into a villain—and so fail to account for the narrator's concluding eulogy. We render the whole last half of the poem essentially irrelevant—a set of decorative descriptions expressing the narrator's pleasure in scene-painting and nothing much besides. We may even, as some have done, begin to

4. See Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1948), pp. 42-44, for a strong statement of the apparent discrepancy between poem and Preface. For the inconsistencies which a purely moralistic reading tends to produce within the poem itself, see Raymond D. Havens, "Shelley's *Alastor*," *PMLA*, 45 (1930), p. 1108; and Frederick L. Jones, "The Inconsistency of Shelley's *Alastor*," *ELH*, 13 (1946), 291-98.

populate the poem with nonexistent furies and invisible Alastors—falsifying the Poet's quest by turning it into a flight from supernatural pursuers.⁵

The way around these difficulties is to see that the Arab maiden never exists as a real possibility for the Poet.⁶ He never notices her. She never insists that he notice her. The ambience she moves in is consistently pale and cool, so that she hardly makes a very warm or vivid alternative to the Poet's dream. In short, after only ten lines in a poem of 720, she simply disappears, as if she had never been there.

To this extent, the narrator is able to see the maiden through the Poet's eyes, describing her as less real and less substantial than the visionary woman of the Poet's dream. But the narrator is unable to sustain his sympathy with the Poet at this point.⁷ The narrator does not in fact believe that a visionary woman is more desirable than a flesh and blood companion. The Poet's reality seems suddenly unreal to the narrator. And it may be the realization of just this discrepancy which shocks the narrator into making his comment:

The spirit of sweet human love has sent
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned
Her choicest gifts. (ll. 203-205)

He is not really suggesting here that the Poet should have chosen the Arab maiden. Rather he is horrified to discover, through his sympathetic description of the Poet's adventures, that the Poet is incapable of choosing any human relationship. In the world of the Poet the possibility of human love does not exist. Loneliness and estrangement are both the condition and the consequence of the Poet's quest. With this realization the narrator recoils momentarily, achieving a distance which allows him to criticize the Poet's predicament. When the narrator makes his comment, he is expressing a sudden insight into the psychological workings of the Poet's vision, seeing it as the projection of frustrated sexuality. His phrase about the "spirit of sweet human love" does not, as Gibson and Wasserman have realized, inject a new allegorical or metaphysical power into the world of the poem.⁸ Instead it

5. This is the single most spectacular symptom of misreading generally found in criticism of *Alastor*. Examples are collected by Gibson, p. 1024. To his list may be added: O'Malley, p. 184; and, apparently, Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1971), p. 298.

6. Gibson, p. 1028.

7. For this failure of the narrator's sympathy, see Wasserman, pp. 24, 30.

8. Gibson, pp. 1022, 1029-30; Wasserman, p. 19.

expresses, metaphorically, in lower case letters, the narrator's analysis of the Poet's vision, demonstrating the sort of critical distance from which the narrator, for all his sympathy, is able to judge the Poet's actions and assumptions.⁹

The narrator starts out speaking the language of a first generation romantic.¹⁰ His invocation is a hymn to Nature, in which he expresses the "natural piety" of his relationship to the world around him: brotherly love for the manifestations of Nature, filial love for the "Mother of this unfathomable world." Lest there should be any doubt about the nature and origin of his assumptions, he concludes the invocation with a frank cento of Wordsworthian ideas and phrases:

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.
 (ll. 45-49)

The Poet, on the other hand, has conceived the possibility of going beyond the manifestations of Nature, to reach a different kind of relationship with reality. Like the narrator, he personifies reality; but unlike the narrator, he personifies reality, not as a parent, but as another corresponding to himself. Like the narrator, he sees love as the proper relationship between subject and object, but the sort of love he has in mind is not, like the narrator's, pious and familial, but passionate and sexual. What the Poet wants cannot be achieved by reason, or judgment, or any active faculty of the mind. It cannot be achieved by analysis or the patient accumulation of detail over time. It cannot be clearly stated in the form of axiom, theorem, proof. The connection he seeks is essentially passionate, passive, immediate, intimate, perfect, ineffable. He seeks nothing less than a complete and feeling correspondence between some ultimate reality and the inner operation of his mind. Once he has conceived the possibility of this kind of union he is hardly likely to be satisfied by the narrator's vision of a Mother merely immanent in Nature. Given this difference, it is not surprising that the Poet's reality should seem dangerously unreal to the narrator.

9. This reading seems the more certain when we recall that the rest of the allegory in *Alastor* is projected from the Poet's mind and that the Poet never fully shares in the narrator's insight here; and that the narrator, for his part, is otherwise consistent in recognising Nature, the "Mother of this unfathomable world," as his sole spiritual reality.

10. See Gerard, pp. 166-67.

The narrator, however, is able to understand at least the early stages of the Poet's education and quest.¹¹ The Poet, he says, seeks knowledge through his love of Nature, his study of philosophy and history, his susceptibility to dream and vision. The narrator, pursuing his own version of the truth, has puzzled equally over the mysteries of Nature, submitted to some of the same obstinate questionings, courted his own visions and ghosts. Even when the Poet leaves "cold fireside and alienated home," the narrator is able to follow him a little way on his journey. So long as the Poet retains his "love and wonder" for "the green earth" and "the varying roof of heaven," so long as he ransacks the ruins of lost civilizations for strange inscriptions and "wild images" which may tell him what he wants to know, the narrator can follow his adventures with sympathy and hope. But when vision and dream threaten to take the Poet beyond the manifestations of Nature and the facts of human history, then the narrator draws back to offer a radical criticism of the Poet's whole undertaking.

The Poet's vision (ll. 149-91) assumes the form of everything the Poet seeks.¹² Her voice reproduces all the impulses of Nature and speaks the "inmost sense" of his abstrusest studies. She is at once another to himself and the intimate reflection of his soul. She is a poet and therefore, we assume, speaks the only language which can hope to comprehend and communicate the truth. The veil she wears, the only hint which seems to stand in the way of perfect communion (a slight but impenetrable barrier, suggesting the all-but-knowable nature of the truth), becomes progressively less of a difficulty, for as she grows warmer, it grows more transparent, until it no longer obscures the "glowing limbs beneath." Her increasing excitement arouses him in turn. Their intercourse of knowledge builds towards intercourse of another sort. The Poet rises to embrace her. After one coquettish gesture of reluctance, she assents and

yielding to the irresistible joy,
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.

But at this point the Poet faints.

He awakes to the impossibility of hope or despair. He has come so far and approached so close to his desire, that he cannot possibly turn

11. See Wasserman, p. 18.

12. It is, in fact, an early statement of what Baker calls "the psyche-epipsyche strategy" (p. 53). His chapter on *Alastor* ("The Necessity of Love; *Alastor* and the Epipsyche") is chiefly an exploration of this aspect of the poem.

back. On the other hand, as close as he has come, he has still absolutely failed to achieve the contact he desires. In this state of frustration, he finds that the appearances of Nature are no longer eloquent. "The mystery and the majesty of Earth, / The joy, the exultation" have all disappeared. In his anguish he resolves to seek his vision in the only direction left to him—in the realm of Death. Lamenting the "deaf air," "blind earth," and "heaven / That echoes not [his] thoughts," he sets sail in search of that doubtful revelation.

The Poet at this point passes beyond the actuality of human contact and the actuality of Nature: beyond everything, in short, which the narrator holds most dear. And the narrator, realizing as much, draws back long enough to voice his suspicion that the Poet's vision may not have come from outside himself. The woman in the dream may not be another, as the Poet hopes, but merely a projection of his own frustration. Though the Poet cannot quite despair of ultimate success, the narrator does, envisioning any further exploration as a hopeless descent into solipsism and self-destruction.

In this sense, the passage we began by examining marks a crucial turning point in the progress of the poem. Up to this point the narrator has been describing, more or less sympathetically, the Poet's quest for ultimate truth. From this moment on he is (I think consciously) conducting a painful examination into the psychology of solipsism, *Sehnsucht*, objectlessness.¹³

We may ask why the narrator bothers. Once he has dissociated himself from the Poet's quest, why doesn't he then leave the Poet to his own devices? Why doesn't the poem end there? Some critics have in fact concluded that the last half of *Alastor* is irrelevant and disproportionate. If the poem is coherent, however, this long and murky journey ought to say something not only about the Poet and the Poet's psychology, but also about the narrator and the kind of difficulty in which he finds himself.

The narrator begins as a Wordsworthian but ends as something else.¹⁴ Even in his confident invocation there are signs of the stress and doubt which will eventually work a change in his point of view. Wordsworth's own view of the relation of the self to Nature is potentially unstable,¹⁵

13. Characterized as such by Wasserman, p. 27. Gerard's article, as the title indicates, is mostly concerned with this aspect of *Alastor*.

14. Wasserman, pp. 34, 40.

15. See, for example, Geoffrey H. Hartman's exploration of these contradictory impulses—*Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1964; rpt. 1971), esp. the chapter on "The Via Naturaliter Negativa," pp. 31-69. For the instability of Wordsworth's vision see particularly pp. 57, 210-11.

liable, in the hands of others, to break down into a disunified pantheism (worship of any stock or stone) or to soar off into the unfathomable realms of transcendent idealism. Any failure of the imaginative faith through which Wordsworth struggled to maintain the integrity of his vision produces, in place of love and joy, an equal and opposite dejection and despair. Under despair lurks the ultimate suspicion that Nature-worship may be itself a kind of disguised solipsism: that the apparent sympathy of Nature is in reality a pathetic fallacy of the human mind. When the narrator says

I have watched
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
And my heart ever gazes on the depth
Of thy deep mysteries (ll. 20-23)

we may hear a note of ambiguity. If he has seen the darkness of Nature's steps, has he seen the steps themselves? If he has seen only the depth of her deep mysteries, perhaps he has not seen the mysteries. If he has watched the shadow, has he missed the substance? Sensing these deficiencies, he has been tempted, like the Poet, to resort to the supernatural:

I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. (ll. 23-29)

Unlike the Poet, the narrator enjoys a real relationship with a real woman. But there is at least a hint in the narrator's description of his love that he, like the Poet (though hardly so acutely), has felt the shadow of estrangement, as if obstinate questioning after ultimate meaning put too great a strain on the innocence of human emotion:

In lone and silent hours,
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
Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
Such magic as compels the charmed night
To render up thy charge: . . . (ll. 29-37)

So the narrator follows the Poet almost as if the Poet's quest were his own. If the Poet succeeds, the narrator will have his answer. And if the Poet fails, the narrator will understand the futility of asking, without having fully committed himself to the question. When the Poet falls into solipsism, the narrator realizes perhaps that his own position is not free from the same danger. He follows the Poet's extended journey as if he were trying to understand himself.

So *Alastor* does not end in the middle. With horror and fascination the narrator follows the Poet through a wilderness of strange descriptions. A detailed and satisfactory account of the last half of *Alastor* has yet to be written. Still we can perhaps agree to recognise two principles working behind the scenery: first, that the various places through which the Poet passes represent projections of his varying states of mind; second, that the descriptions are structured and arranged so as to produce an almost perfect ambiguity. Within each description details suggesting destruction are placed against details suggesting safety; narcissism is balanced against objectivity, significance against silence, in intricate contradictions of turbulence and calm, dark and light, death and birth, nothing and something. Then, though each description tends towards some conclusion it is immediately juxtaposed with another description which tends towards some other conclusion, so that just as we are about to despair of any meaning but the mind's distortion, we are led to hope that we may reach an answer after all.

The ambiguity of "one silent nook" (ll. 571 ff.) can stand for the ambiguity of the whole. This is a place where "the children of the autumnal whirlwind" bear dead autumn leaves—which in turn decay to form the "cavern mould." Out of the mould grow "rainbow flowers" And the fissured rocks are overgrown with ivy—"leaves for ever green / And berries dark"—which we remember from *Lycidas*, if from nowhere else, to be an emblem of immortality. Here death is ambiguous. And here the Poet dies, without hope and without despair. As he dies, he catches sight of the two points of the setting moon—something which may or may not represent a last appearance of his vision. (Assuming that the sight puts us in mind of a pair of visionary eyes, we may take them to be promising, or mocking, or indifferent.) In death the Poet becomes part of the processes of decay and achieves, at the same time, a kind of doubtful immortality. His life and the story of his quest are, as the narrator remarks at various times, both "unremembered" (l. 671)—and commemorated in this poem (l. 706).

Lest we think that the setting here is accidental or that this final description has not been integrated into the poem as a whole, we

AUTHOR, NARRATOR, AND HERO IN *ALASTOR* 127

should recognise that this result has been foreseen from the beginning. The first thing we are told about the Poet is that he is dead and that the "charmed eddies of autumnal winds" have

Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid
Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness.
(ll. 53-54)

This complex fusion of imagery, combining the suggestion of decay (mouldering leaves) with the suggestion of eternal life (the pyramid), ought to convince us that Shelley had his conclusion in mind from the outset.

As the Poet dies, the narrator comments:

when heaven remained
Utterly black, the murky shades involved
An image, silent, cold, and motionless,
As their own voiceless earth and vacant air.
(ll. 659-62)

So though in death the Poet may have achieved something like the resignation of the saint or martyr, the narrator, left to live with his uncertainties, leaves no doubt that he despairs.

What has the narrator learned from telling the Poet's story? First of all he is confirmed in his suspicion that the Poet's quest is quite impossible. The Poet has encountered nothing but ambiguity after ambiguity in place of the passionate certainty he set out to discover. The narrator is relieved by this conclusion: once the Poet has endured his lonely martyrdom, the rest of us are exempt from having to carry out the same experiment. In this sense, the Poet is a kind of expiatory victim, "Glutted with which," the narrator says (he is addressing Death):

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. (ll. 621-24)

For all that, the Poet's death raises more difficulties than it settles. Toward the end of the poem the narrator begins to use language ("creeping worms" and "unheeded tribute," for example) which expresses more bitterness than resignation on his part. In exhausting (vicariously) the possibilities of a point of view which seemed to

threaten his own, he has, ironically, undermined his own assumptions. The narrator senses that with the Poet's death the world has lost a whole dimension of companionable meaning. He can still speak of "mighty Earth" responding with solemn voice (ll. 692-95); but there is a new note of doubt and desperation in his celebrations. What if the air is "vacant," the earth "voiceless," the winds "senseless" after all (ll. 662, 705)? What if Nature, like the Poet's vision, should prove to be "phantasmal" (l. 697)?

The narrator even begins to doubt the eloquence of art, so deep is his despondency. The conclusion of *Alastor* is, among other things, an elegy for the dead Poet, and, like all elegies, it seeks to express both grief and consolation. Unlike most elegies, however, it denies itself the possibility of doing either:

Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting's woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,
And all the shows o' the world are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
(ll. 707-12)

This is more than the hyperbole of grief. The narrator seems to be saying that art cannot contain reality: for if art is narcissistic, then the structure it exhibits is the reflection of the medium, rather than the discovery of objective order. In the last line the narrator may even be suggesting that there is no objective order for art to be discovering in any case.

The Poet is left without hope and without despair. The narrator is left without hope. In the face of his despair he can only hope to imitate the Poet's "cold tranquillity." That at least is the frame of mind he struggles to achieve at the end of *Alastor*, as he contemplates the difference the Poet's life and death have made to his perception of the world.

While the narrator is watching his hero, the author may be watching both hero and narrator with considerable urgency. *Alastor* is Shelley's criticism both of Wordsworth's "something far more deeply interfused" and of a purely transcendent idealism. In his hands these opposing (and related) points of view interact to produce a peculiarly painful sort of intellectual irony. By pitting one against the other Shelley exhausts the possibilities of both. Shelley was determined to see love as the only proper relation between subject and object. In *Alastor* he

demonstrates, however, that if love is too simply conceived (as love of Nature or as desire for some perfectly knowable ideal) it results in nothing but frustration.

Critics have often said that Shelley's assumptions underwent a great change between the composition of *Queen Mab* in 1812 and the composition of the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* in 1816. And often in dealing with *Alastor* (which was written in 1815) they have more or less assumed that because he did not know exactly where he was going he did not know exactly where he was. If we can see *Alastor* as a coherent piece of work, however, we can argue that it represents a deliberate attempt to define and eliminate one set of alternatives. By taking his narrator from the school of Wordsworth, Shelley was able to show the weaknesses of Wordsworth's position (and by implication to criticize Wordsworth for refusing to go behind the questions he had raised). Beyond that, the narrator serves as a useful tool, allowing Shelley to maintain a protective distance between himself and the compelling object of his attention: the Poet and the Poet's quest. Like the narrator, Shelley may have been tempted by the Poet's hope. To judge by the balance of the poem, he was even more fascinated by the consequences of the Poet's solipsism. The last half of *Alastor* is an exhausting investigation into the involutions of a lonely mind. We have some evidence that the narrator feared he might fall into the same abyss. We might well ask whether in describing the Poet's predicament Shelley was also working his way through an experience which he felt deeply and feared more.

The question is at least raised by Mrs. Shelley's note to *Alastor*, in which she hints at Shelley's disillusionment, his difficulties in England, his ill health—and suggests that *Alastor* was written at a time in Shelley's life when suffering had caused him "to turn his eyes inward; inclining him rather to brood over the thoughts and emotions of his own soul than to glance abroad." If we assume that *Alastor* represents a controlled investigation of a psychological state which Shelley himself experienced, or feared to experience, we might expect that he worked on the poem with some anxiety—and finished it with considerable relief. We cannot be sure, but if we admit the speculation, we have some grounds for understanding Shelley's curious treatment of the poem.

Why did Shelley accept a title (from his friend Peacock) when the title names nothing in the poem? And why did he concoct an interpretation of the poem which does the poem so much less than justice?

What, in short, lies behind the curious contradiction between the Preface and the poem?

It may be that Shelley used the Preface to put a difficult experience behind him.¹⁶ If *Alastor* cost him the pains of introspection, and if introspection served only to aggravate the pains of subjectivity, he may have been unwilling to expose his feelings once again when he came to write the Preface. Possibly he was content to enter a moral criticism of the Poet's loneliness—and let it go at that. It is interesting to note in this connection that the first paragraph of the Preface deals adequately with the Poet's quest right up to the time of the vision. It is the last half of the poem—that long account of loneliness, frustration, and apathy—with which the Preface refuses to deal. Shelley's summary of the last four hundred lines of the poem is simply this: "Blasted by his disappointment, [the Poet] descends to an untimely grave." Then, as if he were conscious of having done his hero an injustice by ignoring the real significance of his disappointment, Shelley spends the remainder of his Preface defending him (for his "sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge") against the presumptuous majority—who, Shelley says, may in fact be responsible for the "lasting misery and loneliness of the world."

Shelley's moral criticism is not so much inappropriate as insufficient. In raising only the ethical question, he suggests that *Alastor* is a poem about a moral crime and the appropriate punishment—ignoring the philosophical questions which define our real interest in the Poet's predicament.

Though Shelley may have refused to apprehend his inspiration in cold prose, that is not to say he ignored the questions he had raised, or gave up looking for the answers in his later poetry. Though he may have used the Preface in order to put *Alastor* behind him, he never turned his back completely on the experience he had gained by writing the poem.

In the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, for example, Shelley successfully avoids the pitfalls described in *Alastor*.¹⁷ Here again he is concerned with the attractive mystery of transcendent Power: only here he is

16. Gerard, for example, remarks that *Alastor* "is a sort of cathartic poem, in which Shelley embodied the dramatic wrestling of his saner self against the temptation of extreme idealism" (p. 165). Baker thinks that Shelley's aim "was to set forth as objectively as possible, and as an object lesson, a state of mind with which his own experiments and experiences had intimately acquainted him" (p. 52).

17. See Wasserman, pp. 15-16.

willing to admit that Power remains unseen. He has given up the possibility that "sage or poet" may hope for a direct response—a "voice from some sublimer world." Instead he focuses on the inconstant manifestations of Power in the "various world" of Nature: its reflection in human thought, its consecration of "each human heart and countenance." By denying the Poet's hope, Shelley avoids falling into the Poet's dilemma. He sees our recurring moods of "despondency and hope" as a function of the inconstancy of Power—and no longer as the meaningless fluctuation of a lonely mind. It is difficult to come from *Alastor* to the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* without seeing signs of a lesson learned. And when we read in the last line of the poet's determination "To fear himself, and love all human kind," we may wish to bring in *Alastor* as a kind of gloss. "To love all human kind" is exactly what the Poet could not do, given the nature of his aspirations. And if we take "fear" for once in its usual sense, we may find in the Poet's failure good reason for anyone to fear himself and the lonely involutions of his mind.

In any case I hope we can agree that if we ask more of *Alastor* than we are used to asking, we may find more in it than we have usually expected to find. There is good reason to think that *Alastor* raises more difficult questions, in a more disciplined and dramatic way, that it opens out more directly, and more complexly, into some of the wider themes of Romantic literature, that it reaches conclusions which are more serious, more significant, and harder won than Shelley himself was prepared to assert. And there is good reason to think that Shelley's relation to *Alastor* is thornier—at once more urgent and more distanced—than critics have frequently assumed. If we can accept something like the reading I have suggested here, we can locate *Alastor* more exactly in terms of Shelley's own development—as a kind of negative success which contributes its own distinctive force to the dynamics of the poet's career.

Georgia State University