

and his awareness of it becomes thematic in several of his major poems. In Shelley's first major poem, *Alastor*, it is central.

### Alastor

The preface to *Alastor* presents the poem as an allegory of 'one of the most interesting situations of the human mind'. It tells the story of a youthful poet gifted with 'an imagination inflamed and purified', who uses this gift, not in the manner which Shelley offers in the *Defence* as a description of the moral sense, the 'identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, *not our own*', but to pursue the embodiment of '*his own* imaginations'. Shelley argues that the 'speedy ruin' of this young poet exposes the danger of 'self-centred seclusion'.

The first part of the preface identifies the poet's fault, the second emphasises the nobility of his failing. He is contrasted with, and preferred to, the 'unforeseeing multitudes' who also 'attempt to live without human sympathy', but whose failing is the result of lack of imagination, of spiritual torpor, rather than of an imagination too inflamed or misdirected. The preface, as has often been remarked, assumes an attitude to the poem's hero, which, if not inconsistent, is at least troublesomely complex.

An unstable relationship with their central characters is a characteristic of a number of romantic poems, in particular those of Byron. The first two cantos of *Childe Harold* are besprinkled with hints to the reader to associate Harold with Byron himself, and yet Byron was annoyed with reviewers who made this identification, and remarked: 'I would not be such a fellow as I have made my hero for all the world'.<sup>9</sup> There is a strange passage in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which illustrates this uncertainty very clearly, and which is also very close to the theme of *Alastor*. Mary Wollstonecraft is arguing that friendship, 'the most sublime of all affections', rather than the kind of love celebrated by Rousseau, ought to be the young girl's objective in marriage. The benefits of friendship are real and stable whereas love is a passing fancy. The romantic lover is described in terms which bring him very close to the hero of *Alastor*:

The lively heated imagination . . . draws the picture of love, as it draws every other picture, with the glowing colours, which the daring hand will steal from the rainbow, that is directed by a mind, condemned in a world like this, to prove its noble origin by panting after unattainable perfection, ever pursuing what it acknowledges to be a fleeting dream.<sup>10</sup>

This splendidly Shelleyan sentence (note the Promethean metaphor) only just sustains its disapproval of the state which it describes, so that it is no surprise when the argument pauses to claim that the 'delusions of passion', against which women are being warned, are also 'a strong proof of the immortality of the soul'. Mary Wollstonecraft ends by 'leaving superior minds to correct themselves, and pay dearly for their experience'. Like Shelley she regards the love she has described as a 'superior' failing; as in *Alastor* an imaginative involvement with the predicament of the lover struggles against a sympathetic but detached awareness of its absurdity. The conflict expresses a hesitation between two ethical systems, the one social and normative, the other individual and empathic. The language of morals struggles against the language of self-love.

*Alastor* records the composition by one poet of an elegy for another. The central section of the poem is a biography of the dead poet, a man who had sought ultimate knowledge, and found it, but was left unsatisfied by his discovery, just as he was unsatisfied by the love offered him by an Arab maiden. No worldly knowledge, no human lover, could satisfy his restlessness. In a dream he saw a woman, the figment of his own imagination, and enjoyed an ecstatic union with her. He awoke and felt himself an alien in an uncongenial world, through which he wandered in search of his dream lover. He found a boat, entirely unseaworthy, and set to sea aboard it. His pursuit of the dream lady had become a pursuit of death, and in surrendering himself to death he achieved a kind of exhilaration. But magically the boat carried him safe through storms, and then drifted up a river, against the current. Near the source of the river the poet disembarked and walked to a deserted clearing where he lay down until death came to him.

The obvious classical model for *Alastor*, a poem in which one poet records the suffering through unrequited love of a fellow poet is a poem well known to Shelley, Virgil's tenth eclogue, the

elegy for Gallus. *Alastor* begins and ends with an invocation. Shelley begins by invoking Mother Nature to assist him in his song; he ends by addressing the dead poet. Framed by these invocations is a biography of the poet whose death he mourns. The structure of Virgil's poem is similar. Its central section consists of a speech by Gallus which is enclosed within a pastoral framework. The poem opens with an invocation in which Virgil prays for the assistance of the pastoral muse Arethusa, and at the end Virgil returns to the pastoral setting and dedicates his poem to Gallus. The form establishes the contrast between Virgil, the pastoral poet, and Gallus, the elegiac love poet.

Virgil presents his elegy, and the speech by Gallus that it contains, as a fiction, '*pauca carmina*', a few verses, and within his poem he imagines Gallus asking the Arcadian shepherds to sing verses commemorating his love. Virgil's poem is then the gift which, within the poem, Virgil imagines Gallus requesting. The poem is, so to speak, a response to itself. Virgil, from within a rich pastoral setting, imagines Gallus in a harsh, cold, mountain landscape, and Gallus, in his speech, imagines the pastoral landscape in which Virgil sings. In composing Gallus's speech Virgil imagines the passionately unsatisfied love of the elegiac poet, and within the same speech Gallus imagines the less demanding happier love of the pastoral world, the love that he might have felt for Amaryllis or Menalcas. Gallus and Virgil contrast with one another, but they also reflect one another's worlds, and their two worlds interpenetrate. Pastoralism as Gallus conceives it is influenced by his soldier's imagination. Instead of goatherding, he thinks of himself hunting wild boar. The pastoralism of Virgil's world is compromised by the rigours of Gallus's world, so that his song becomes a 'labor' rather than a spontaneous product of pastoral otium.

Gallus's speech expresses a farewell to poetry: his love for Lycoris can no longer be subdued by expression within the form of elegiac poetry. He ends his speech in submission to the power of love: '*Omnia vincit Amor; et nos cedamus Amori*' (69) Poetry, even love poetry, can, in a sense, only be written in defiance of the omnipotence of love. Gallus's submission is, as he realises, a vow of silence, and, because the poem which contains it is an elegy, it is also conceived as a kind of death. Virgil's poem is also a farewell. Virgil represents it as his last exercise in the pastoral mode, his '*extremum laborem*'.

But the situation is more complicated than this. Virgil's pastoral poem attempts to embrace a different kind of poetry, Gallus's elegiac lament. Similarly, when Gallus imagines the pastoral life, elegiac poetry attempts to embrace the pastoral. The poem's mirror images force together Gallus and Virgil. Gallus imagines carving Lycoris's name on the bark of trees: '*crescent illae, crescetis, amores*', as the names grow, may my love grow. In the poem's conclusion Virgil returns to his grief for Gallus: '*cuius amor tantum mihi crescit in horas/quantum vere novo viridis se subicit alnus*' (73–4). The same verb, *crescere*, and a similar botanical simile, describe both Gallus's love for Lycoris, and Virgil's love for Gallus. The two perspectives that the poem contains, the pastoral and the elegiac, become one, as Virgil realises that the fiction he has created, the speech in which Gallus expresses his unfulfillable, unconquerable love for Lycoris, is a song sung by himself, a commemoration of his own love for Gallus; that the last line of Gallus's speech might just as well have served as the first line of his own conclusion: '*Omnia vincit Amor; et nos cedamus Amori*'. The pronoun, *nos*, is no longer general; it forces Gallus and Virgil together as fellow prisoners of love.

The poem ends in the serenity of a Virgilian evening, but the evening hides menace, its darkness is noxious and threatens the crops and the singer's voice. Virgil represents himself weaving a basket: the basket is his poem, but he may also be alluding to Theocritus's first idyll, the model for the tenth eclogue. In the Greek poem a goatherd offers to the singer Thyrsis a cup on which is engraven a boy—concentrating on weaving a basket he has forgotten his duties as guard, and is oblivious to the fox which is rifling his vineyard. Engrossed in composing a poem for Gallus Virgil has unwittingly destroyed the pastoral world which has been his peculiar poetic province.

Virgil's poem reaches its climax when Virgil recognises that he has not written a pastoral poem which includes an elegiac poem, but an elegiac poem in which Gallus is to him what Lycoris is to Gallus. The complexities of the poem's structure are revealed as integral to its theme. From within a pastoral setting Virgil imagines an elegiac love poem within which Gallus imagines pastoralism. Structurally the tenth eclogue is a pastoral poem which subsumes an elegiac lament; thematically it is an elegiac love poem which subsumes its pastoral framework. In devising a fiction in which Gallus recognises, and submits to, the omnip-

otence of love, Virgil achieves a recognition of the nature of his own love for Gallus, and in doing so destroys his pastoral world. It is a poem which dramatises a process of learning about oneself, not through introspection, but by devising a fiction.

*Alastor* is in no sense an imitation of eclogue X. The similarities between the two poems are only general. A reading of eclogue X is however useful in suggesting a suitable approach to *Alastor*. Both poems are rooms of mirrors; both are concerned to delineate a process, a movement towards a new awareness of oneself.<sup>11</sup>

The early careers of the narrator and his hero exactly correspond. Both pursue 'Nature's most secret steps'; the narrator by sleeping in graveyards, and dabbling in witchcraft, the hero by studying the magical monuments of ancient civilisations. But the narrator, although he does not attain full knowledge of nature's 'inmost sanctuary', experiences a revelation satisfying enough to leave him serenely still:

moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre  
Suspended in the solitary dome  
Of some mysterious and deserted fane . . . (42-4)

His hero, however, studies mystic hieroglyphs:

till meaning on his vacant mind  
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw  
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (126-8)

But his knowledge leaves him still restless, and he wanders on until he dreams of the woman that he will pursue until his death.

The central contrast is between the satisfaction of the narrator, expressed in his stationary situation, and the dissatisfaction of his hero, expressed in his endless wandering. The hero, despairing of finding his ideal lady, eventually gives himself up to death. His corpse is described as: 'A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings/The breath of heaven did wander . . .' (667-8). It is precisely the same comparison that the narrator had used to describe his own self-satisfaction. As when Virgil claims that his love for Gallus, '*crescit in horas/Quantum vere novo viridis se subicit alnus*', the dead hero and the narrator who commemorates him merge, and that is the point to which the poem has been driving.

To Shelley poetry is the expression of 'beautiful idealisms'; writing a poem is exactly analogous to the hero's dream of an ideal woman. The narrator's poem is then equivalent to the hero's dream, and in the end the narrator recognises that the story he has told is not an idle fiction, but an allegory of his own life. The narrator's hero looks at a stream, and realises:

Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness  
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulfs,  
Thy searchless fountains, and invisible course  
Have each their type in me. (505–8)

Whatever the narrator's hero looks at transmits back to him a reflection or an allegory of himself. Similarly, after his hero has died, the narrator reviews his hero's career, and realises that he was: 'a dream/Of youth, which night and time have quenched forever' (669–70). The hero who dreamed of an ideal lady, and died pursuing his dream, is himself a dream. The narrator, like his hero, sees only reflections of himself. Just as the lady his hero dreams is an idealised self, so the hero that the narrator imagines is only an idealised self.

The contrast between the satisfied, stationary narrator, and the restless, dissatisfied hero is apparent, not real, for writing a poem is the expression of the restlessness that the narrator denies, and his hero's physical wanderings are images of the narrator's mental travels, a stream into which the narrator projects an allegory of his own life. In the same way, the girl that the hero dreams, 'herself a poet', is in the same relation to the hero that hero, himself a poet, occupies as regards the narrator, the writer of the poem.

*Alastor* is a complex series of mirror images, and Shelley suggests as much within the poem. Its central images are images of reflection. Awakening from his dream the hero looks on the scene before him, 'as vacantly/As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven' (201–2). Later he sees on the bank of a stream yellow flowers, presumably narcissi, which 'For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,/Reflected in the crystal calm' (407–8). Later still he looks into a well, which 'Images all the woven boughs above' (459), and:

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. (469–74)

Related to these images of reflection are the characteristic verbal figures of the poem, the self-reflexive simile, the simile that compares a thing to itself, and other reflexive constructions. The voice of the lady of the hero's dream is 'like the voice of his own soul'. He sees her limbs 'by the warm light of their own life'. Compare these expressions to the description of the hero's love, which 'ever feeds on its decaying flame'. Death lures him with a 'doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms', and at this point he is 'Startled by his own thoughts'. The poem's structure is itself reflexive, for the narrator's fiction reflects his own predicament, his hero is a mirror image of himself. *Alastor* is a poem about the nightmare of solipsism, in which everything the mind sees becomes a reflection of itself, and this absolute isolation of the self is, as Shelley suggests in his preface and as the career of the poem's hero makes clear, equivalent to death.

Keats's *Endymion* is the product of an intelligent reading of *Alastor*.<sup>12</sup> Endymion, like the hero of Shelley's poem, falls in love with the creature of his own dream, the goddess of the moon, and his love, like that of Shelley's hero, is necessarily frustrated. But Endymion learns in the end not to ask for the moon (it is typical of Keats that this homely proverb should be at the centre of his myth); he accepts instead a human lover, and in rejecting the impossible ideal, accepting the real, he gains what he has rejected. The mortal lover reveals herself as the goddess of the moon. Ideal love is fulfilled only through an acceptance of the real, not by rejecting it. But this solution would not have contented Shelley, for, to him, love of another originates in self-love, and the rejection of the ideal that the self dreams leaves the individual with no impulse to project his desires into the world around him. Those who reject their ideal suffer a death more dreadful than that which befalls his poem's hero:

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 in 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.

Shelley's preface to *Alastor* must be supplemented by his fragmentary *Essay on Love* if we are to understand his position. In the preface he says of the poem's hero that he 'seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception'. In the *Essay on Love* Shelley describes the origin of love as the perception within the self of 'the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man'. The prototype, the original, has, by definition, an existence purely mental. An embodiment of the prototype is a contradiction in terms, hence the frustration of the hero of *Alastor*. The word Shelley uses to signify the embodiment of the original which man ought to pursue is 'antitype'. But the antitype, the embodied ideal, is also an impossible goal, for no thing or person will entirely satisfy the lover's yearning for an exact embodiment of his ideal. The antitype is 'the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends'.

Shelley appears to have made a distinction only to dismiss it as insignificant. Certainly the poised and beautiful opening of the essay, a passage which, until a more intelligent mode of reading Shelley has been generally accepted, will no doubt be dismissed by many as a characteristic relapse into self-indulgent self-pity, would seem to suggest this:

I know not the internal constitutions of other men, nor even yours whom I now address. I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when misled by that appearance I have thought to appeal to something in common, and unburden my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land.

The mind imagines its ideal, searches in vain for its embodiment, and feels within itself 'an insufficient void'. The essay appears to condemn man to a life of incurable frustration, and this is true. But then, through an elegant turn in the argument, that painful frustration is redeemed, recognised as the source of all that is benevolent in man. For it is man's frustration, the void within



him, that turns him outwards towards the world: 'it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that without the possession of which there is no respite to the heart over which it rules'. What man finds are only the shadows of the antitype of his dream: the heart is never at rest. But in the end the heart's restlessness is celebrated, for the heart at rest, the mind unself-conscious of 'an insufficient void', contains within itself no dynamism to turn it outwards in a loving communion with the world around it: 'So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was'. Notice the use here, as in *Alastor*, of a reflexive construction, man as the sepulchre of himself, to express the mind turned inwards against the world, in a state which both the poem and the essay suggest is equivalent to death.

To Shelley the completion or perfection of Endymion's love would also have seemed a kind of death, for exactly the same reason that the extinction of the need to love is a death; both relax the emotional pressure that drives man outwards to the world.

We can now return more confidently to the hero of *Alastor*. His mistake is that the awareness of the void within his mind, instead of directing his mind outwards, precipitates it inwards into a self-destructive solipsism. The more interesting, the more problematic case, is that of the poem's narrator. In the first line of the poem he addresses, 'Earth, ocean, air'. Fire, the vital, the dynamic element, is suspiciously absent. In the invocation to the goddess of nature that follows he seems perfectly at one with his environment, conscious of no void within himself. And this is death. The narrator recognises this when he repeats a simile, the comparison of himself to an aeolian lyre, when describing the dead body of his hero.

In the poem's introduction the narrator recalls how he had once engaged in researches into nature 'Like an inspired and desperate alchemist'. His studies did not bring him ultimate knowledge, and yet he claims to be serene. By the end of the poem, the narrator has realised that his serenity was founded on self-ignorance, for the story he has told, the fiction he has created, has given ample evidence of a restlessness that has not been satisfied. In the poem's conclusion he longs again for 'Medea's wondrous alchemy'. He longs to resuscitate his dead hero and to grant him the gift of eternal life:

Which but one living man has drained, who now,  
Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels  
No proud exemption in the blighting curse  
He bears, over the world wanders for ever,  
Lone as incarnate death! (677–81)

The reference is to Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew, who was granted eternal life as a curse rather than a blessing, as a punishment for having mocked Christ on the cross. These lines rehearse in miniature the poem's entire procedure. In the course of telling his tale the narrator has become more and more convinced of the identity of himself and his hero. His plea that his hero be restored to life is both a covert plea for himself, and an expression of the last distinction between himself and his hero. In so far as the narrator still considers life a blessing he remains separate from his suicidal *alter ego*. But even as the wish is articulated, the narrator realises that he does not desire it, that eternal life now seems to him, as it would have seemed to his hero, a curse rather than a blessing. His identification of himself and his hero is complete. In articulating a sentiment, the desire for eternal life, the narrator understands his true feelings towards it. Similarly, in telling a story about a poet, the narrator is forced to discover himself.

For Shelley, language becomes poetry when expression becomes discovery. Poetry, like metaphor with which it is closely associated, is an instrument for discovering the 'before unapprehended'. The narrator's poem, like all poetry, has resulted in a progress towards self-knowledge; *Alastor* is a dramatisation of this progress. The narrator develops from one kind of death to another, from the death of those who feel no void within themselves, to the death of his hero, whose consciousness of this void leaves him suicidal. The narrator, aroused from one extreme, has created a fiction which precipitates him into the other. By the end of the poem he is sunk in 'pale despair and cold tranquillity', exactly in the situation of his hero when he lay down to die. Shelley's preface describes only two kinds of people; those whose 'self-centred seclusion' brings them to speedy ruin, and the others, worse than they, the 'selfish, blind and torpid' who feel within themselves no insufficient void. In writing his poem the narrator has extricated himself from this second category, he has rediscovered the void within himself,

but he has succeeded only in joining the first category, in becoming one with his hero. He has progressed from selfishness to solipsism, from one kind of death to another. He is unable to take that further step which Shelley accomplishes so elegantly in his *Essay on Love*. He becomes a prisoner of his own fiction, the solipsistic world of mirrors in which his hero lived, from which there is no escape but in death.

### **Laon and Cythna**

*Laon and Cythna*, Shelley's longest and least admired poem,<sup>13</sup> tells the story of a young man who wanders away to an isolated cliff to indulge his despair at the failure of the French Revolution. From the cliff he witnesses a combat between an eagle and a snake. The defeated snake swims to shore where it is succoured by a woman who has watched the contest from the beach. She invites the young man to accompany her, and the snake on a voyage during which she explains to him the significance of the battle he has witnessed, and tells him her own story. The boat carries this odd group to a mysterious temple, a kind of Valhalla for dead revolutionaries. There the young man hears a recent arrival, Laon, tell the story of his life. The rest of the poem, despite an odd grammatical lapse, consists of Laon's account.

Laon, a young Greek, had early recognised the oppressive tyranny over his people exercised by the Turkish emperor. He found a sympathetic audience for his revolutionary poems and ideas in his sister, Cythna. Their intimacy was interrupted when their house was raided by a band of the tyrant's soldiers. Laon was chained naked to the top of a tower, and left to die; Cythna was forcibly enrolled in the tyrant's harem. Laon contrived to escape with the assistance of an aged, but enlightened, hermit, who took Laon away to his house to recuperate; he was convalescent for some years. After recovering he heard of a young woman who was leading a revolt against the emperor. He hurried to join the insurgents, and after the rebels' victory, recognised and was reunited with his sister. The success of the rebels was shortlived, and the revolution was crushed after a counterattack by the tyrant's allies. Laon and Cythna escaped, took refuge in a ruined building, and enjoyed an ecstatic marriage night. There Cythna told Laon of her own adventures