

THE SOLIPSISM
IN SHELLEY'S "ALASTOR"

by

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Being a term paper, written in the style of Shelley's Alastor (and about Shelley's Alastor, and other works), for Jack Stillinger's graduate class in comparative literature on the romantic poets, Byron, Shelley, and Keats.

Remember me as well, thou earthly matrix,
 Of rock and crag, trees and wintry sky,
 I knew thee well, as well as he
 Who is the object and the subject of my song
 For I once sought refuge in your deep embrace,
 The pleasantness of a gentle breeze
 As I sat among the trees and watched
 The flowers dance. I heard Aeolean tunes
 That wafted near and far but always
 Out of reach; I knew thee well, and loved thee.

O muse mihi! tune your song to the somber
 Shifting chords that flood my soul
 In this hour I call upon you. Bring her
 Stately beauty and majestic poise now
 Back to me, as if the boughs of heaven
 Overspread the place where now I linger;
 O spirit that I shared with Earth,
 The fire of wisdom that warmed my loneliness
 As I lay dying in the wintry wastelands
 Of a misappropriated youth; recall for me
 The all-pervading sense of confirmation
 When you spread beneath my fall the quest
 Of love and hope, of life's intent.
 Give me to remember on this occasion.

For there was a Poet whose untimely tomb,
 He forecast in his open'ng poem, Alastor;
 And he died before his journey was complete.
 His fragile soul had scarcely graced this earth,
 Protected by his pride and sense of noble birth
 He never had a chance to really make ends meet;
 O Muse, for heaven's sake don't jest, for there
 Is much that I must say, and much that rests on this;
 (The mind must always flow two ways at once.)
 Where was I? Alas! he was a lad of tender years
 When first inklings of the Universe
 Raged its potent storms through his imagination;
 And when other humans of his age
 Displayed their bestial traits he shied away
 And went inside --- and there he played;
 He found a universe as vast and striking
 As anything the gods of Olympus ever thought to make
 And that ephemeral land beyond, which men call earth
 Became the model of his world,
 With entropy turned upside down

And there he dwelt amongst the gods
 Admonishing them, and calling them by name;

When he had mastered all that fell within
 The endless stretch of his wide dominions,
 He stepped outside himself for just a while
 He took his dream upon the road,
 Where he traveled far and wide;
 Beseached the earth to confirm his vision
 Amongst the props and scenes where human life had played
 Its grand tragic passions, remote in time
 Oh, so long, so long, so long ago
 That nought remains, except
 The empty-headed progeny of those who,
 Spectators all, like himself,
 Stood still to watch the world pass on parade.
 From Athens, Tyre, and Babylon,
 To the monuments of human waste,
 In Thebes, Memphis, Aethiope, and beyond.
 And when Imagination raged this dull assault
 He mistook its flash for timeless inspiration.

When he had ranged the charnel remnants
 Of humankind's past glories, and found there
 Nothing that he himself could fail to master,
 When he had breathed deep the musty air and mist
 Of the monuments to kings carved out
 By the life and blood of simple men
 Condemned and chained to their destination
 That men like he in future days could gaze
 In wonderment and admiration;
 When he had imbibed as best he could
 The spirit of things once attained there,
 And had stumbled across the ruins
 Of Babylon's ancient Ziggurat
 When he had braced himself upon the Acropolis
 (Elbowing aside the other tourists)
 And called upon the spirit of wisdom
 That had built a temple with other men's stolen gold;
 When he had paid tribute of admiration to Rome
 Where monuments were built from stone
 At the cost of liberty and death and taxation
 Such as men had never known -- O muse,
 Steady my trembling soul -- When he had done
 All of these things and found nothing
 To propitiate the demands his inspiration

Had cast across the land like a net
 Of expectation that none could hope to meet,
 Why, he turned his talents to Nature,
 And dared her in his curious way
 To meet his gaze, and hoped that She
 Would not fail him the way men had.

Meanwhile, an Arab maiden fleshed her form
 Into his dreams, and there she seemed more real,
 More sensuous, more heavenly than Mary
 He dreamed he was awake, and when he slept
 She was Gone! So in his dream, he awakened,
 And he chased after her; across the ranging
 Grassy fields where the west wind plays
 Evoking thoughts of other-worldly salvation;
 Then he disappeared from sight, our poet,
 As he entered into the mystic darkness
 Of a brighter realm where nought was real
 But the spirit he sought which was he
 And the land he adored which was he
 And the completion of a mystery deep as he,
 Yes, deep as he could make it.
 He pursued himself; All the way to the shore
 Where he found a small boat (which he stole)
 And set sail, driven by the west wind, I presume.

"O Arab maid, where art thou?" he pined,
 As he plied the plaintive strains of his lonely song
 "The birds of the air have their nests,
 And the creatures of the ground have their holes,
 But the Son of genius have not where
 To lay his weary head, lest thou offer up
 Thine quaint and lovely bosom ..."
 So he set sail across the moonlit night,
 He knew where not, as upon the waves he went
 And lo! the moon arose to cast
 Her silvery coins across the waves
 Of the deep black sea, surging despair
 As it bore him further and further from Shore
 Out into the far vast comfort of his solitude
 Darkness, darkness all around and not a soul to greet
 The little boat fled on, driven by a wave
 Narrowly missed the cragged mountains, within, a cave,
 The fluidity of fear was ringed with cold grey granite
 The waterspout of life then sucked our poet into heaven...

Where life was like a stream, if I am not mistaken
 Between the broadest reach of eternal heaven
 And the endless expanse of oceans down below.
 It runs its course, you see,
 Quite modestly, at first, until raging
 like a storm it hits the Ocean.
 Our Poet alighted upon the shore
 Rescued by the west wind, lest he slip
 Back to the earth below the whirlpool
 And discharge his mortal clay on its embankment;
 He gazed upon the beauty of this elevated land,
 In this cathedral of the wilds, where towering pine
 Arches over to intertwine its boughs,
 A tapestry of earth intermixed with heaven.
 And up above, the rose window of the noonday sun
 Filtering its cryptic message through the trees
 In the interplay of light and shadow
 Like the mysteries of life and death
 (O Nature, I can taste the cool breeze
 That comes up from the water,
 Scented by those floral introverts at water's edge,
 And I recall the way the sun would play
 Upon the moss and scruff of lichen
 That softened the boulders and hard scabble
 Where small animals took refuge
 Till they knew I was their friend.)
 Yes, our poet found himself in finer pastures.

Hither the poet came. In the night he cast
 His gaze upon the starry scheme, the points
 Of light, geometer's dream, found the wisdom
 He had sought, amongst the stars of ancient time
 As in Thebes, and Luxor, and in Ecbatana
 The schemes of thought, transcribed
 In light against the dark of desert night
 And he knew the constellations of the mind:
 How men had come to reason, and to see
 The patterns, hidden in the face of Nature.
 When all was light he watched the quiet course
 Of day's events, and the wind's diurnal respiration
 Inhaling in the morning mist, stirring up-valley,
 Pausing in the heat of day, then settling back
 In evening expiration. He watched the flowers stir;
 He saw the clouds churn slowly by, their course
 Obscured by nothing in the sky; He understood
 The harmony at last, even of death itself,

And knew that he had failed to match this
 Masterful Creation. He wept. He preached Unity,
 He thundered against containment.
 But west winds crossed Olympus's prow
 Carried his words back unexamined
 And left them there to reverberate
 In the wilderness of the poet's destination.
 Yea, gentle poet, where is your Arab maiden now?

And nought but knarled roots of antient pines
 Had he for where to lay his head,
 When he had followed river's course,
 Not to its end, but t'where it grew mature;
 For gentle moss and dark enclosure
 Gave way to rock and cold and gushing force
 Which he could not control, but watched
 With mounting indignation. Was he scared?
 Twixt pinnacle and precipice the land about
 Was ghastr and dreadfully consumed,
 Black gulphs and yawning caves
 Those jagged crags and brakes of thorny thicket
 Blocked his way at every step. The pace was quick,
 Too fast to halt or slow, plunging churning and
 Slipping in a crashing torrent beyond his grasp
 In a thunderous cacophony of implication.
 Aeolian's mild strains by vast and precipitous degrees
 Had given way to the shriek of a misguided symphony
 Grating, raging, blasting hideous shocks
 Of solid ice and jagged rocks
 Against his brow. He longed to disembark
 And lay-me-down beside still waters
 Like the ones he had heard of long ago

He lay exhausted, an old man, with grey hair
 Upon the ground. Upon the earth.
 Colorful, sweet and lovely earth. He spake;
 Every breath a chore. It was the end.
 I have overshot my mark, he sighed;
 My trajectory, from where I stood,
 It overshot Wordsworth's golden mean,
 For He had stood in reverence to the land
 He felt the land; But I was the land
 And that was more than any man can be.
 Nature was benign; but I was scared.
 And none was more remote from my design
 Than she..... who was nature, who was wisdom

Who was everything of beauty and intellect,
Who was everything, alas, but She.
I have failed to ride these currents to the sea.
And I shall never again feel the west wind blow.
O Mother of Land and Ocean and Trees,
Take these bones within thy kind embrace,
Whence they came, and pour this troubled spirit
Back into that vast reserve whence it came.

He spoke, but no one heard. No one,
But that Spirit of Solitude,
The Oversoul. The Epipsychidion. The image
Of exaggerated self, refracted through the universe
And driven merciless and mocking back unto itself;
The poet's vision of intellectual beauty,
Gleaned from nature, he personified,
Then retraced the steps of immortal humankind
To fall at last beside the banks
Where four rivers meet,
If not on earth,
Then perhaps in heaven.