

# Reflections of the Self and the less Obvious Others in *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*

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## Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822): a Life of Radical Quest

Shelley's family was well-known in England; Bysshe Shelley, the poet's grandfather, became a baronet in 1806 and his father, Timothy (later Sir Timothy) was a member of the Parliament in the House of Commons and Shelley himself was in line for a baronetcy. He was educated at Syon House Academy and Eton College, however he proved to be more the child of the radical 1790s than that of the conservative ruling class. He could not conform to the traditional institutions and his behavior, politics and art were dedicated to destroying them.

Shelley's life was extremely unorthodox and he was known as Mad Shelley for his fickle temper and later as Eton Atheist. He was expelled from the university along with his classmate Thomas Jefferson Hogg for distributing their pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). In the summer of 1814, he took a further step toward his public ostracism by abandoning his pregnant wife and their first child to elope with Mary Godwin, the 16 years old daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and his intellectual hero, William Godwin. In 1816 he spent a fruitful summer with Lord Byron in Geneva where he meditated upon the relationship of the creative mind to nature in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and the psychological journey of a young spirit in *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*.

Upon his return to England, life dimmed significantly for Shelley by some personal tragedies, therefore, he left again in 1818 to join his kindred spirit Lord Byron in Italy. He lost his two children in 1818 and 1819 because of his insistence on nomadic wandering; this loss left his marriage extremely ruined and the lovelight dimmed. However, this period is one of the most prolific periods in Shelley's life; he composed *Julian and Maddalo*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*, "Ode to West Wind", *The Mask of Anarchy*, "Stanzas Written in Dejection", Odes "To a Skylark" and "To Liberty" and many other shorter poems and political prose. In 1821 he composed *Epipsychidion* in which

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he expressed his idealistic platonic love to Teresa Viviani, the young woman who was imprisoned in a nunnery.

Shelley's ideals were never fulfilled; he expressed political aspirations to reform the world via revolution. He traveled to Ireland to incite the spirit of nationalism among the Catholic peasantry and he spent some time making public speeches about the rights of the Irish people. He wished to implant a secularized version of the millennial anarchy promised by Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* (1667). He scorned institutional religion and stressed the necessity of Free Will. Although Shelley admitted that his aspirations for politics, life, and his art were beyond human possibility, he was more inclined to death than attracted to accommodation. John Gibson Lockhart noted while reviewing *Alastor* (1816) that Shelley's "imagination is enamoured of dreams of death; and he loves to strike his harp among the tombs." (Ann K. Mellor & Richard E. Matlak, *British Literature 1780-1830*, p.1052). Like the poet in *Alastor*, Shelley spent most of his life searching for the ideals and trying to achieve self-knowledge, however he died short of those aspirations. Despite the stormy weather Shelley set out late on a threatening afternoon after a visit to Livorno and he got drowned in the Bay of Spezia. He ended in ashes after being cremated by Byron and the romantic adventurer Edward John Trelawney. According to Trelawney the flames reduced Shelley's dead body to powder except for his heart which remained intact entirely; it was the heart of a wanderer who had never stopped aspiring for the fulfillment of the impossible.

## **II**

### **Reflections of the Self and the less Obvious Others in *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude***

Despite the undeniably Eastern setting of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude* (1816), approaching the poem with the same critical patterns used for other Romantic Orientalist literature yields significant frustration. The reason is largely attributed to the distinctly psychological character of *Alastor*, which makes the more obvious targets of Orientalist criticism – that is, human representations and social interactions – almost entirely absent. While other critics have chosen to read the absence of populace and the emphasis on psychological journey as an inherent violence on the East, or, alternately, simply a characteristic of the romantic quest-narrative genre, the present paper argues that the two approaches are actually quite compatible. The internalized quest for the object of desire that the poem so extensively dramatizes is in fact a necessary strategy for representing the potential epistemological violence on the Eastern Other. Furthermore, the following discussion highlights how the interrelated constructions of Self and Other, via notions of gaze, desire, and reflection, represent distinct failures in understanding, and interacting with the East.

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In order to better articulate the argument that follows, it is first useful to highlight a couple of the critical works that inform the present approach, and to briefly describe the discussion into which this paper enters. As it has already been mentioned, the distinct lack of any Eastern populace or narrative in *Alastor* has significantly influenced the criticism addressing the text's representations of the East. Saree Makdisi, for instance, reads the depopulation of the landscape as a "ruthlessly violent" attempt to establish and legitimize Western dominance (Saree Makdisi, "Versions of the East: Byron, Shelley, and the Orient" p. 220). By depopulating the sites of human origins, says Makdisi, the West is able to reclaim Oriental land and reinvent the past of the Orient in continuity with Europe's own history. Explicitly opposing this reading, Francis Lo argues that "what leads Makdisi to the exaggeration of describing Shelley's construction of the East as 'ruthlessly violent' is his neglect of the question of genre, or, more accurately, his treatment of *Alastor* as a piece of travel writing" (Francis Lo, "Southey, Shelley and the Orientalist Quest: Geography and Genre" *European Journal of English Studies*, p. 146). Lo instead focuses on the elements of the text that place it in the tradition of another genre, the Orientalist quest-romance. Lo emphasizes the ways in which *Alastor* actually criticizes that genre, which comprises of a lineage of texts including Walter Savage London's *Gebir* (1798), Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), and *The Cruse of the Kehama* (1810) (Ibid. p.144). While Makdisi and Lo turn much of their attention to the external landscapes, geographies, and journeys of the poem, this paper chooses to focus on the less obvious and more complex human relationships. Specifically, Shelley's Poet is read as a representative of any number of Romantic Orientalists who, like the Poet, enter the East in pursuit of a better articulation the "self" – be that a self representing an individual or national identity. In his quest to find "strange truths in undiscovered lands" (Ann K. Mellor & Richard E. Matlak, *British Literature 1780-1830*, 77)\*, the Poet dramatizes two fatal approaches of interacting with the Eastern Other: first, the dangers of isolationism; and second, the failure (as either political or poetic pursuit) of defining the self through the Other.

Throughout *Alastor*, the text consistently supports the construction of characters with appearances of "a gaze," and more specifically, a gaze of desire. For this reason, it is essential to identify three moments where the explicit mention of a gaze alters the perception of the self/other pattern. The first of these moments arrives with the very earliest descriptions of the Poet and his lifelong desire for knowledge. The poem establishes the fact that the Poet "left / his cold fireside and alienated home" (76) (as most Romantic Orientalist writers

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\*All subsequent references to the poem are from this edition.

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do, at least psychologically if not geographically) for the purpose of enlightening his own understanding of his self and the world around him. It is noted that this desire begins as a solitary one; his gaze focuses on the distinctly inanimate:

Suspended he that task, but ever gazed  
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind  
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw  
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (125-128)

In many ways, the image of the good poet leaving the safety and comfort of his own home in order to meditate on the wonders of the universe describes a prominent style of the Romantic lyrical poetry in general. One might even recall M. H. Abrams' famous description, which, although specifically addressing a subgenre of Romantic lyrics, provides a highly applicable account of the poetic process of *Alastor's* Poet: the speaker, prompted by an aspect in the landscape, enters into a meditation on his current situation, in such a way that recursively ends back on the landscape and the current moment in time that initiated the movement to interiority (M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style of the Greater Romantic Lyric" pp.527-8). In much the same way, for the Poet of *Alastor*, "the landscape becomes the catalyst for memory and meditation" (Ibid. p.201), however solitary and isolated that poetic process may leave him.

At first this Poet, so "obedient to high thoughts" (107), seems to be driven by a noble pursuit; he is a unique genius toiling away in solitude for the purpose of increasing human enlightenment. However, this reading is quickly complicated with the second moment where a gaze appears, which is when the "Arab Maiden" targets a much different object of desire. The maiden, it should be noted, is a figure that not only gives the necessary explanation for the Poet's sustenance and shelter, but also provides the only prolonged interaction between two human beings in the poem. There is something vague concerning the maiden's dedication to practical tasks, and her active participation in the social and domestic realms, when compared to the Poet who neither recognizes nor acknowledges anything either practical or social in his world. The Poet even fails to recognize the fact that the maiden is so "enamored"(133) and fascinated by him. The text gives no indication that the Poet acknowledges her, suggesting a kind of obliviousness or perhaps callousness on the part of the Poet. The suggestion is further emphasized later in the poem when the speaker asserts that the Poet's past actions have "spurned" the "choicest gifts" of "the spirit of human love" (203-06).

The maiden's gaze is, of course, distinctly human and sentimental; instead of staring at inanimate ruins, her action is "to gaze upon his lips / Parted in slumber" (135-36). Here a question may arise about what it means to have the Other objectify and gaze upon the Poet while he makes no effort to communicate with the woman, nor give any indication that a social interaction is

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taking place. Instead, their interaction is a highly economic exchange: he exploits the relationship for his selfish procurement of goods and services, as represented by the food, shelter, and care.

Quite significantly, the Arab maiden is not the only Eastern figure that goes unacknowledged by the Poet. The core of Makdisi's argument about *Alastor* is the fact that by "depopulating" the East, that space becomes open for discovery, and therefore able to be invented by the West for its own purposes. Yet, in many ways Makdisi downplays the many interactions – or opportunities for interactions – the Poet actually has with individuals from the populace. In fact, the Poet's refusal to interact is repeated numerous times: he fails to recognize the cottagers that feed and shelter him, the mountaineer who gazes upon him in awe, or the maidens, who so sympathetically identify with his pain. These moments that affirm the Poet's solitude help construct that vital aspect of the Poet's character that is so oblivious to others, so bent on his own interests that he becomes an isolationist. With an almost painful irony, it is only after witnessing the Poet's insistent silence in the face of humanity does the reader finally hear him directly address another entity, which ends up being a swan on the river.

The third moment where the gaze of desire shifts is at the onset of the Poet's dream, and his subsequent descent into obsession, madness, and eventually death. Although one might be tempted to read the Poet's turn to the "veiled maid" as distinctly humanizing shift in the arch of the character – the shift from the desire for reason and knowledge to the desire for the human love – it is difficult to read the dream figure as anything else but a version of his own self. The Poet's desire seems to indicate what can be described as the desire for the compliment. The phrase refers to that obsessive need for the sexual compliment (the sexual opposite) that underlies all human desire. The veiled maid quite perfectly acts as that object promising the ultimate completion of the self. However, far from being this perfect compliment, the veiled maid is described in terms that suggest she is nothing more than a reflection of the Poet's own sense of self-identity. She is, stated simply, not his *compliment* but his *reflection*. The descriptions of her lend evidence: "Her voice was like the voice of his own soul"(153); she was "Herself a poet" (161); and her interests sound remarkably like his own:

Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme  
And lofty hope of divine liberty,  
Thoughts the most dear to him (158-60)

Khan notes that the use of the veil in Shelley's poetry often indicates that an inner truth may be inconsistent with its outer illusion (Jalal Uddin Khan, "Shelley's Orientalia: Indian Elements in his Poetry" *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, p. 40). In this case, the

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desirable maid, who seems like the perfect Other, is merely an empty reflection of the dreamer himself – a fact that is emphasized further with the theme of reflection which from this moment is developed (as discussed at greater length below). It is also important to note where this dream occurs. After passing through numerous ruins suggestive of the origins of human life ("awful ruins of the days of old" including Athens, Tyre, Balbec, Babylon [108-9]), the Poet reaches the vale of Cashmire. Here, in the location the Romantics recognize as the cradle of civilization, the site of Eden and creation, the Poet engages in his own god-like act of creation. The Poet, in a true god-like form, makes a figure in his own image. Yet, he fails to recognize the veiled woman as his own reflection. Instead, he mistakes his self with the Other.

Lo argues that Romantic quest-romances in which Orientalist motifs take a center stage often feature characters that do not necessarily function as representations of the East, but rather as representations of the universal nature of humanity (Francis Lo, "Southey, Shelley and the Orientalist Quest: Geography and Genre" *European Journal of English Studies*, p.148). A similar argument might legitimately apply to *Alastor*. However, it is difficult to ignore just how perfectly the construction of the Eastern Other is stereotypical of Romantic images of the region. It can be noted that the description of veiled beauty invents her as an object, a thing to look at, describe, and pursue – not necessarily to know and understand. She is described as having "fair hands," and a "warm light of her own life" (175), but the description becomes even more erotic as it progresses:

Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil  
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare  
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night  
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips  
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly. (176-180)

In a stereotypical feminization of the East, Shelley provides an image of the delicate female who is justifiably conquered as an object of desire. Even her "eagerly" outstretching arms and lips is a pose suggestive of willing submission to the onlooker's desire for domination (sexual or otherwise). These connotations of the veiled woman appear in stark contrast to the character of the Poet, who is never described in physical terms. As well, the Poet exhibits discernibly Western qualities (at least at the start of the poem). The Poet is full of respect for logic, reason, and independence, all of which translate to ennobling his pursuit for knowledge and dominance of a landscape not his own.

The Poet awakes from his dream with a much different "gaze" than the kind that characterized his prior engagement with the landscape. The woods have become "vacant" (195) and the hills are "clear and garish" (195). To all this the Poet awakens and "gazes on the empty scene as vacantly / As Ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven" (201-2). Clearly, the image invokes the

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emptiness of the self staring unknowingly at its own reflection – a position the Poet now occupies in his search for his dream girl. Because of his new object of desire (the Other/Self replacing Knowledge) the act of wandering – the very act that was previously so noble – now becomes a “weary waste of hours” (245). As his body literally wastes away with time, the Poet, as well as the poem, becomes increasingly obsessed with the notion of reflection.

After the turbulent ride on the river, the Poet reaches a bank covered with yellow flowers that “for ever gaze on their own / Dropping eyes, reflected in the crystal calm” (407-8). Again, the image of staring at one’s reflection is less than subtle, and becomes more so from this point on. In fact, the poem itself becomes as obsessed with images of reflection as the Poet is in the actual act. The Poet later comes to the “still fountain,” at which:

His eyes beheld

Their own wane light through the reflected lines

Of his thin hair ...

As the human heart gazing in dreams over gloomy grave

Sees its treacherous likeness there (469-74).

The likeness of one’s “human heart” is explicitly characterized as traitorous, disloyal, and, in short, dangerous. Yet, that does not stop the Poet from soon apostrophizing to another figure of reflection, the stream that “imagist” his life (505). The Poet then follows the stream in his wandering, creating a very distinct image: the Poet is not only figuratively following the image of himself in the dream figure, but also quite literally following his reflection as it beams up from the water below him.

The Poet’s ultimate failure in his pursuit is a decided end to a life seeking fulfillment in the self. As Lo describes it, "by dying in a cold, desolate landscape, in a region associated with the quest for human origins, Shelley's Poet demonstrates both the futility of such a quest and the sterility of the Lake poets' concomitant search for religious consolation and certainty" (Ibid. p.158)

### **III**

## **The Conclusion**

Shelley has led an extraordinary life questing for the ideal and self-knowledge. He has been a solitary figure like the Poet in *Alastor*. Shelley in his preface to the poem says that:

It represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate. (Ann K. Mellor & Richard E. Matlak, *British Literature 1780-1830*, p.1053)

Indeed, he is describing himself by those words and the failure of the Poet suggests a failure of all solitary figures in the literary realm who likewise attempt to search for the "perfect Other," the compliment, within the solitary

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quest for knowledge and self-improvement. Instead of the Poet finding himself through the enlightenment of the landscape, and coming out more self-aware after epiphany, Shelley's Poet is eventually destroyed by his commitment to such an isolated and self-serving quest. Curiously, despite the decided failure of the Poet figure, even the speaker seems to draw distinct parallels with this character, perhaps suggesting all poets (Shelley included?) are prone to the dangers of defining the self through the Other. As part of his invocation of the Muse at the beginning of the poem, the speaker likens himself to "an inspired and desperate alchemist / Staking his very life on some dark hope" (31-2). The "dark hope" is further connected to the Poet's own with the speaker's acknowledgement that "ne'er yet / Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary, / Enough from incommunicable dream..." (37-9). The veil, the dream, the search for sanctuary all point back to the subject of the poem – the dangerous unsolved mysteries of discovering "strange truths in undiscovered lands." In reference to Byron, Meyer describes a concept easily applicable to Shelley: "the realization that any attempt to escape self-recognition only strengthens it, especially in the narrative field of the other." (Eric Meyer, "'I know thee Not, I Loathe Thy Race': Romantic Orientalism in the Eye of the Other." p.561). Perhaps inescapably, the Other – Eastern or otherwise – is co-opted and misinterpreted for the self-serving purpose of self-definition. In the end, the cost of that articulation of the self is the erasure of the Other.

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