

SHELLEY'S DESPONDENCY THEME:
THE SHORT LYRICS FROM
1817 to 1822

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PREFACE

This study is the result of my continued interest in Shelley and of the encouragement given this interest by Dr. Charles Walton, Department of English, Kansas State Teachers College. Since this particular aspect of Shelley's poetry has not been previously investigated, my use of secondary sources has been necessarily limited. Those which have been especially valuable are Newman Ivey White's Shelley, the standard biography of the poet, and James A. Notopoulos's The Platonism of Shelley, a definitive study of the Platonic elements in Shelley's poetry. I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Walton for his encouragement and suggestions and my gratitude to Dr. June Morgan, Department of English, Kansas State Teachers College, for her interest and assistance.

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CHAPTER I

THE BIOGRAPHICAL BASIS

Shelley's longer poems, those which he regarded as the most important works of his career and to which he dedicated most of his time and energies, are characterized by ". . . the struggle for human weal; the resolution firm to martyrdom, the impetuous pursuit, the glad triumph in good; the determination not to despair."¹ Yet Shelley's genius was perhaps primarily lyrical, and his shorter lyrics, which sincerely and intensely express his most personal thoughts and emotions, are often marked by despondency, disillusionment, disappointment, and despair. The reasons for this tone in these shorter poems are to be found to some extent in Shelley's character and in the events of his life, because it is true in regard to Shelley, as to few other writers, that his works are the man himself. Few other poets expressed more directly their own feelings, and Shelley's poetry acquires a fuller meaning through an examination and understanding of this poet's personality and the biographical events which were the source of his lyric poetry.

¹Mary Shelley (ed.), The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, I, ix.

Shelley was by nature introspective, speculative, and contemplative, and he was extremely sensitive to all that involved him, either directly or indirectly. These characteristics made him particularly susceptible to strong, intense emotions:

His extreme sensibility gave the intensity of passion to his intellectual pursuits; and rendered his mind keenly alive to every perception of outward objects, as well as to his internal sensations. Such a gift is, among the sad vicissitudes of human life, the disappointment we meet, and the galling sense of our own mistakes and errors, fraught with pain.²

Shelley's sensitive, introspective nature was affected by the ill health and pain which he suffered throughout his life and by the relative solitude to which he was accustomed. His wife attributed his frequent periods of depression almost wholly to this illness and solitude:

Throughout life also he was a martyr to ill health, and constant pain wound up his nerves to a pitch of susceptibility that rendered his views of life different from those of a man in the enjoyment of healthy sensations. Perfectly gentle and forbearing in manner, he suffered a good deal of internal irritability, or rather excitement, and his fortitude to bear was almost always on the stretch; and thus during a short life, he had gone through more experience of sensation than many whose life is protracted . . . The weight of his thought and feeling burdened him heavily . . . Ill health and continual pain preyed upon his powers; the solitude in which

²Ibid., p. xi.

we lived, particularly on our first arrival in Italy, although congenial to his feelings, must frequently have weighed upon his spirits.³

Edward Trelawny, Shelley's closest friend in his last days, wrote in his memoir of the poet that Shelley was condemned to spend the largest part of his life in "utter loneliness" and that his habit of " . . . eternally brooding on his own thoughts, in solitude and silence, damaged his health of mind."⁴

Upon such a personality, its extremely sensitive nature influenced by ill health and solitude, the events of life would inevitably have had a profound effect, particularly if they were unhappy and tragic events, as were the main situations of Shelley's life. His biography reveals that as a result of his experiences he felt himself to have been condemned and persecuted, both as a man and as a writer, to have been disappointed and disillusioned in friendship and love, and to have failed in gaining literary appreciation or in realizing a fulfillment of his literary ideals. Furthermore, he was continually disturbed by financial worries and the deaths of loved ones. The despondency and despair which he felt as a consequence of his experiences

³Ibid., p. xiv, I, 227.

⁴Edward J. Trelawny, The Last Days of Shelley and Byron, p. 37, 56.

explain, to some degree, the tone of the short lyrics in which he expressed his most personal feelings.

The events of his life which contributed to his despondency began in his childhood. At Syon House Academy, for which he had been poorly prepared by his previous experience at home, he was bullied and taunted because he did not care for or excel in boyish games.⁵ He was wretchedly lonely at the school, and his life there, according to his cousin, Thomas Medwin, was "a perfect Hell."⁶ Two years later at Eton he was nagged and teased as before, but on a larger scale; "Shelley-baits" were almost a daily occurrence.⁷ Shy and sensitive, Shelley was not fitted for the rough and boisterous pastimes of the other boys, and he undoubtedly suffered cruelly in the persecution he endured at Syon House Academy and Eton.

During his year at Oxford Shelley experienced more injustice and disappointment. He had apparently been in love with his cousin Harriet Grove for some time, and the families of the couple had agreed tacitly upon their engagement.⁸ In 1810 Harriet became alarmed by the radical religious

⁵Newman Ivey White, Shelley, I, 20.

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷White, op. cit., p. 38.

⁸Ibid., p. 67.

and political opinions which Shelley expressed in his conversation and his letters and told her fears to her parents, who broke the couple's engagement.⁹ Shelley was disturbed for some months afterward by the incident because he felt the injustice of the Groves' action and because he was disappointed in Harriet, whom he had considered a promising candidate for enlightenment. In January, 1811, when he mistakenly believed Harriet was married to another man, he wrote Thomas Jefferson Hogg: "She is gone, she is lost to me forever-- she is married, married to a clod of earth, she will become as insensible herself, all those fine capabilities will moulder."¹⁰ The second incident of 1811 to affect him profoundly was his expulsion from Oxford. Shelley felt keenly that his expulsion was unwarranted and that he had been a victim of injustice and tyranny. According to Hogg, who was also expelled when he defended his friend, Shelley was "deeply shocked" and "cruelly agitated" and commented: "I have experienced tyranny and injustice before, and I well know what vulgar violence is; but I never met with such unworthy treatment."¹¹ His

⁹Loc. cit.

¹⁰Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, I, 41.

¹¹Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley at Oxford, pp. 220-1.

expulsion was only one of the many experiences that were to convince him that he was a victim of persecution.

In the meantime, he was to continue to be disappointed in the people whom he loved and trusted. He considered his sister Elizabeth, like Harriet Grove, a prospective pupil and attempted to convert her to his radical views, even to encouraging her to enter an illegal union with Hogg.¹² She appeared to agree to some extent with Shelley's opinions, but after Shelley was expelled, their father succeeded in teaching her to distrust Shelley for his disobedience and his dangerous beliefs and to avoid him.¹³ In the spring of 1811, Shelley expressed to Hogg his disappointment in his sister because she was no longer serious and contemplative, but, rather, interested in trivial, worldly things:

. . . she is not what she was, she is not the singular angelic being whom you adored & I loved: I mourn her as no more, I consider the sister whose happiness is mine as dead.¹⁴

His disillusionment with his sister was followed by his disillusionment with his youthful idol, Southey, whom he met in December, 1811.¹⁵ He thought that Southey

¹²White, op. cit., p. 103.

¹³Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁴Shelley, op. cit., I, 93.

¹⁵White, op. cit., p. 183.

no longer retained his high principles, but instead urged expediency in political and moral matters:

Southey has changed . . . He to whom Bigotry Tyranny and Law was hateful has become the votary of these Idols . . . I feel a sickening distrust when I see all that I had considered good great & imitable fall around me into the gulph of error.¹⁶

To the several, keen personal disappointments he had experienced was thus added his first disillusionment with a public figure whom he had previously regarded as a champion of virtue.¹⁷

Shelley's next disappointment, a few months later in Ireland, was with people in the mass. In February, 1812, he and his wife Harriet, whom he had married in the previous August, arrived in Dublin, where they were to undertake to free the Irishmen from the oppression of poverty, ignorance, and political restrictions.¹⁸ Shelley published and distributed two pamphlets in his campaign. His Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists was directed to professional classes and designed to create an organization of intellectual liberals and radicals. His Address to the Irish People was

¹⁶Shelley, op. cit., p. 208.

¹⁷White, op. cit., p. 186.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 197.

intended " . . . to familiarize to the uneducated apprehensions of ideas of liberty, benevolence peace and toleration."¹⁹ These pamphlets, however, received little notice, because the Irishmen were confronted by an immediate emergency, and they had little patience with Shelley's assertion that political expediency was insignificant in comparison to intellectual emancipation.²⁰ Shelley gradually realized the futility of his efforts, withdrew from circulation two of his more recent pamphlets, and prepared to leave Ireland:

I submit. I shall address myself no more to the illiterate, I will look to events in which it will be impossible that I can share, and make myself the cause of an effect which will take place ages after I shall have mouldered into dust.²¹

Disappointed that his active campaign of reform had failed, he no longer expected an immediate revolution in human conduct in the present society.

He returned to England a disillusioned man, only to meet with more disappointments. In the spring of 1811, he had begun a correspondence with Elizabeth Hitchener, a woman of somewhat radical political and religious ideas,

¹⁹Shelley, op. cit., p. 239.

²⁰White, op. cit., pp. 214-5.

²¹Shelley, op. cit., p. 277.

whom Shelley had decided to convert to his own unorthodox beliefs.²² From the first, she had been an admiring, trusting disciple, and Shelley had achieved a close companionship with her through their letters.²³ He shared his most personal thoughts and feelings with her and constantly assured her of the value of her friendship to his personal happiness and of the value of her intellect and character to the great cause of truth and justice.²⁴ In July, 1812, he persuaded her to join his household, and it was not long before he realized she was not the superior being he had idealized.²⁵ In November, she was persuaded to leave the Shelleys, and in the next month Shelley described her to Hogg:

She is an artful, superficial, ugly, hermaphroditical beast of a woman, and my astonishment at my fatuity, inconsistency, and bad taste was never so great, as after living four months with her as an inmate. What would Hell be were such a woman in Heaven?²⁶

Shelley's opinion of his wife underwent a similar change a year later. He had married Harriet thinking she was as eager for truth and justice as he, and for awhile after

²²White, op. cit., p. 141.

²³Ibid., p. 142.

²⁴Ibid., p. 199.

²⁵Ibid., p. 263.

²⁶Shelley, op. cit., p. 336.

they were married, she studied Latin, read aloud constantly, and adopted and echoed Shelley's opinion on almost every matter he considered important.²⁷ Late in 1813 she ceased her attempts to share Shelley's intellectual interests and no longer cared to educate herself in those pursuits which meant the most to him.²⁸ In March, 1814, he began to live away from home at a friend's, where he

. . . suddenly perceived that the entire devotion with which [he] had resigned all prospects of utility or happiness to the single purpose of cultivating Harriet was a gross & despicable superstition . . . [he] felt as if a dead & living body had been linked together in loathsome and horrible communion.²⁹

He apparently realized that Harriet was not interested in learning for her own sake, but only to please Shelley and to reflect his views.³⁰ He remarked later to Peacock that the partner of his life must be able to feel poetry and understand philosophy and that Harriet could do neither.³¹

Shelley soon discovered, however, that there was a woman who could share his intellectual interests, and he

²⁷White, op. cit., p. 270.

²⁸Ibid., p. 323.

²⁹Shelley, op. cit., p. 401.

³⁰White, op. cit., p. 350.

³¹Loc. cit.

persuaded Mary Godwin to elope with him to Switzerland in July. The couple found on their return to London in September that, as a result of their action, they were damned and ostracized. Shelley was most affected by the reaction of Godwin, who refused to have any connection with the two or to talk to anyone except his lawyer about them.³² On October 24, Shelley wrote Mary:

My imagination is confounded by the uniform prospect of the perfidy and wickedness and hardheartedness of mankind . . . I have been shocked and staggered by Godwin's cold injustice . . . his cutting cruelty.³³

Godwin's particular reaction disturbed Shelley, because Shelley had idolized the philosopher since the beginning of their correspondence early in 1812 and their first meeting later that year. He had considered Godwin with awe and veneration and had stated that every trace of Godwin's existence was sacred.³⁴ Therefore, it was bitter and depressing for him to endure Godwin's condemnation, to realize that where his character should have been best understood, it was instead scorned.³⁵ Shelley was

³²White, op. cit., p. 377.

³³Shelley, op. cit., p. 408.

³⁴Ibid., p. 229.

³⁵White, op. cit., p. 430.

further disappointed in Godwin a few months later, because Godwin resumed relations with the poet in order to demand money from him.³⁶ His disillusionment was complete when he was forced to realize that however great Godwin the philosopher was, Godwin the man was nevertheless selfish and hypocritical.

He endured Godwin's treatment, however, and the general condemnation of the English public until the spring of 1816. Then, his patience tried by Godwin's haughty tone of moral superiority and condescending talk of forgiveness, Shelley wrote:

Do not talk forgiveness again to me, for my blood boils in my veins, and my gall rises against all that bears the human form, when I think of what I, their benefactor and ardent lover, have endured of enmity and contempt from all mankind.³⁷

Shelley, unable to bear any longer what he believed to be the hate of all English people, resolved to leave the country to retire to a solitary region. Prior to his sailing for the Continent, he wrote in May:

Continually detained in a situation where I esteem a prejudice does not permit me to live on equal terms with my fellow beings, I resolved to commit myself to a decided step.³⁸

³⁶Ibid., p. 403

³⁷Shelley, op. cit., p. 459.

³⁸Ibid., p. 472.

He returned to England, however, in September to solve the legal difficulties of a financial arrangement with his father, who refused to advance him any money while he was abroad.³⁹

While Shelley was in London, he saw Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, for what was the last time on September 24.⁴⁰ On October 9, he received a "very alarming" letter from her, and two days later, after a search, he learned that she had been found dead in a hotel room with a bottle of laudanum and a note on a bedside table.⁴¹ There were several possible reasons for her suicide. She felt dependent upon the Godwins, with whom she had been living, and she had recently learned that she was not Godwin's child, as she supposed, but the illegitimate offspring of Mary Wollstonecraft and an early lover.⁴² In September, when two of her aunts were visiting in London, she had made plans to return with them to Ireland as a teacher, but her hopes were thwarted, quite possibly because of the elopements of Mary and her step-sister, Clarie Clairmont,

³⁹White, op. cit., p. 448.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 469.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 470.

⁴²Ibid., p. 472.

who was at the time expecting Byron's illegitimate child.⁴³ Shelley and Mary could not fail to realize that all possible clues to the reasons for her suicide led to their elopement, and they felt miserable about Fanny's death, since they were not certain that their action was not blameless.⁴⁴ Shelley wrote nothing about the suicide and its effect upon him except for two references in a letter to Byron to an event previous to Harriet's death that was "a far severer anguish" and that affected him "far more deeply."⁴⁵

Another cause of concern to Shelley, which was later to have profound consequences, was related to Claire and Byron. In 1816, he began his long and difficult service as mediator between Claire and Byron on behalf of the daughter Allegra, who was to be born to them. Byron wished to place the child in care of his half-sister, Augusta, but when Claire objected violently to the arrangement, he agreed, upon Shelley's intercession, to let Claire care for the girl until she was seven years old.⁴⁶

In December, 1816, there occurred another tragedy which was also to have deep implications for Shelley. The

⁴³Ibid., pp. 471-2.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 472.

⁴⁵Loc. cit.

⁴⁶White, op. cit., p. 460.

body of his wife, Harriet, was found December 10 in the Serpentine River.⁴⁷ When Shelley received the news on December 15, he left for London.⁴⁸ He seemed most concerned about their two children, referring to Harriet only as "this poor creature."⁴⁹ He did not feel responsible for Harriet's suicide and defended himself to Southey: ". . . you accuse me wrongfully. I am innocent of ill, either done or intended; the consequences you allude to in no respect flow from me."⁵⁰ It was only later that Harriet's death caused him "deep agony of mind," a mental state which he usually concealed.⁵¹ In 1817, he was still despondent, although he only once admitted that the cause of his depression was Harriet's death.⁵²

For Shelley, the most distressing result of Harriet's death was the Chancery suit filed against him by Harriet's father and sister for custody of Harriet and Shelley's two children. John and Eliza Westbrook filed a bill January 10, 1817, which contained the history of Shelley's relations

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 482.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 483.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 485.

⁵⁰Shelley, op. cit., II, 231.

⁵¹White, op. cit., p. 486.

⁵²Loc. cit.

with Mary and Harriet and which was supported by a copy of Shelley's Queen Mab, the "Letter to Lord Ellenborough," and nine of Shelley's letters.⁵³ The Westbrooks were obviously using Shelley's opinions only to obtain custody of the children, but Shelley was convinced that tyrannous society was attempting to punish a philanthropist for his good deeds.⁵⁴ Although the case was heard on January 24, 1817, the Lord Chancellor postponed his decision until March 27, at which time Lord Eldon ordered that the children should be brought up by guardians chosen by him from nominations received from both parties.⁵⁵ His decision was based not upon Shelley's opinions, either moral or religious, nor upon Shelley's elopement with Mary, but upon the poet's conduct backed by his immoral opinions.⁵⁶ The Chancellor was convinced that if Shelley were to have sole custody, he would undoubtedly inculcate similar opinions in the children which would, in turn, lead to similar conduct.⁵⁷ On July 25, 1818, it was finally decided that Dr. and Mrs. Hume would be the guardians, that Shelley would be permitted

⁵³White, op. cit., pp. 489-90.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 491.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 493-5.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 495.

⁵⁷Loc. cit.

to see the children once a month or twelve times a year in the presence of the Humes, that the Westbrooks would be permitted to visit them once a month unattended, and that Shelley's father and his family would be permitted to see them without restrictions.⁵⁸

During 1817, Shelley was absorbed in the preparations for the trial and, thereafter, in anxiously awaiting its outcome. The son of Leigh Hunt, whom Shelley had begun to support in December, 1816, along with his many other dependents, described Shelley's " . . . unconcealed anxiety and eager recital of newly awakened hopes, with intervals of the deepest depression."⁵⁹ Shelley was also troubled by the physical seizures which usually occurred at times of disturbance and agitation.⁶⁰ At the end of June, his health became much worse, and in a letter to Hunt he referred to a constant pain in his side and a depression of strength and spirits.⁶¹ It was not, however, until the middle of September that the state of his health became alarming, and during the rest of the year he became increasingly

⁵⁸White, op. cit., p. 497.

⁵⁹Quoted in White, op. cit., p. 500.

⁶⁰White, op. cit., p. 500.

⁶¹Shelley, op. cit., p. 543.

worse.⁶² In a December letter to Godwin he described his state of mind as either torpid or awakened to unnatural and keen excitement.⁶³ In the evenings, he wrote, he sank into "a state of lethargy and inanimation," the prey to "the most painful irritability of thought."⁶⁴

During 1817, Shelley devoted himself, whenever he was able, to poetry, and he wrote a great deal. Of his shorter poetry, three melancholy verses, reflecting the distressing circumstances of the past year were composed: "On Fanny Godwin," "That Time Is Forever Dead, Child," and "Death." The despondency expressed in the three despairing lyrics of 1817 was the culmination of the griefs and hardships which Shelley had endured in 1816 and 1817: ". . . sorrow and adversity had struck home; he struggled with despondency as he did with physical pain."⁶⁵ "On Fanny Godwin" reveals that he felt personally responsible for her death because he did not sense her despair in their last conversation. The reason for his despondency is evident:

⁶²White, op. cit., pp. 536-7.

⁶³Shelley, op. cit., p. 572.

⁶⁴Loc. cit.

⁶⁵Mary Shelley, op. cit., III, 101.

Her voice did quiver as we parted,
 Yet knew I not that heart was broken
 From which it came, and I departed
 Heeding not the words then spoken.⁶⁶

"That Time Is Forever Dead, Child" expresses a brooding sorrow because the past with its hopes and fears is gone, never to return, although the poet yet stands alone in the present to remember the events of the past in "life's dark river" or "life's dim morning." Shelley expresses this same theme in "Death," in which he laments that ". . . the dead return not . . .," but that ". . . this most familiar scene, my pain, / These tombs,--alone remain."

In March, 1818, after Shelley's departure from England and arrival in Italy, his state of mind and body improved.

In that month he wrote to Hunt:

My spirits and health sympathize in the change.
 Indeed, before I left London, my spirits were
 as feeble as my health, and I had demands placed
 upon them which I found difficult to supply.⁶⁷

Until July, he seemed happy and appeared to be enjoying his life in Italy, although he was constantly traveling and had formed no new friendships and received very few letters

⁶⁶Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley, ed. by George E. Woodberry, p. 355. All subsequent quotations from Shelley's poetry and prefaces are taken from this edition.

⁶⁷Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, II, 2.

from England.⁶⁸ The nine weeks he spent at Bagni Lucca were characterized by tranquillity and calmness, and although he wrote little beyond completing Rosalind and Helen, he was, nevertheless, thinking of Prometheus Unbound and The Cenci.⁶⁹

In September, his happiness was shattered by an event that was profoundly to affect the rest of his life. In April, Claire and Byron had reached an agreement to the effect that Byron should have complete custody of Allegra.⁷⁰ Shelley had served as mediator for the two, but, regarding Allegra almost as one of his children, he had urged Claire not to surrender the child completely.⁷¹ Claire, however, thought that Byron would eventually take a different attitude and so agreed to Allegra's departure on April 28.⁷² Byron placed the child in the home of Mr. Hoppner, the British consul at Naples.⁷³

In August, Claire regretted making her promise never to see her daughter and persuaded Shelley to accompany her to Venice. The two visited the Hoppners and decided that

⁶⁸White, op. cit., II, 14.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 20-2.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 10.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 12.

⁷²Loc. cit.

⁷³White, op. cit., II, 29.

Shelley should see Byron alone, since the news of Claire's arrival would cause him to depart immediately.⁷⁴ At the meeting of the two poets, Byron was cordial and proposed that Allegra go to Padua, where he supposed Claire and Mary to be.⁷⁵ It was then necessary for Claire and Mary to reach Este as soon as possible, and, unaware that his own daughter, Clara, was ill, Shelley sent instructions to Mary on August 24 to travel immediately to Este.⁷⁶ Mary, with Clara and William, arrived there on September 5 and were met by Shelley.⁷⁷ Clara had had a teething ailment which developed during the journey into a serious attack of dysentery, and soon after arriving her condition became alarming.⁷⁸ She improved somewhat, although she was still seriously ill, and she seemed well enough on September 22 for Shelley to return to Venice.⁷⁹ He instructed Mary to have Claire accompany her and the children to Padua, where he would meet them and take them to Venice.⁸⁰ Shortly after their arrival there

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 33.

⁷⁵Loc. cit.

⁷⁶White, op. cit., II, 35.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 36.

⁷⁸Loc. cit.

⁷⁹White, op. cit., II, 38.

⁸⁰Loc. cit.

on September 24, Clara died.⁸¹

Shelley's dejection poems, marked by a brooding, mysterious melancholy and a weary, tired despondency, date from Clara's death, but their theme is not the death of the child. "Julian and Maddalo" and the poems published with it were written in the fall of 1818 and were, according to Shelley, all his " . . . saddest verses raked up into one heap."⁸² Mary's comment upon the poems of this year was as true of his emotional and physical state at Este as at Naples, since the tone of his poems remained fairly constant from Este in late September to Naples in December:

Constant and poignant physical suffering exhausted him; and though he preserved the appearance of cheerfulness, and often greatly enjoyed our wanderings in the environs of Naples, and our excursions on its sunny sea, yet many hours were passed when his thoughts, shadowed by illness, became gloomy, and then he escaped to solitude, and in verses, which he hid from fear of wounding me poured forth morbid but too natural bursts of discontent and sadness. One looks back with unspeakable regret and gnawing remorse to such periods; fancying that had one been more attentive to the nature of his feelings, and more attentive to soothe them, such would not have existed--and yet enjoying, as he appeared to every sight or influence of earth and sky, it was difficult to imagine that any melancholy he showed was aught but the effect of the constant pain to which he was a martyr . . . We lived in solitude--and such is often not the nurse of cheerfulness; for then, at least with those who have been exposed to adversity, the mind broods over its sorrows too intently . . . Shelley never liked society in numbers, it harassed

⁸¹White, op. cit., II, 38-9.

⁸²Shelley, op. cit., II, 246.

and wearied him; but neither did he like loneliness. . . .⁸³

Mary understood clearly and bitterly that Clara's death was caused by Claire's insistence upon seeing her child, Shelley's yielding to her, and his deception of Byron that forced him to insist upon Mary's journey when Clara was ill.⁸⁴ Mary became antagonistic in her grief and withdrew to brood alone, and Shelley, thinking she had deserted him, felt despair and loneliness in their separation.⁸⁵ This reason for his dejection seems probable, since Mary's note upon the poems expressed remorse for what appears to have been a spiritual desertion. In his illness and hypersensitivity, Shelley probably magnified the estrangement beyond all proportion. His state of mind was hidden from Mary and from their friends, and his letters for the four months after Clara's death give no hint of his misery or its cause.⁸⁶ They record a much worse state of health--which was significant in that the health of his mind and body was usually parallel--but were otherwise very impersonal.⁸⁷

⁸³Mary Shelley, op. cit., III, 206-7.

⁸⁴White, op. cit., II, 47.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 48.

⁸⁶Ibid., 50.

⁸⁷Loc. cit.

While the impersonal Shelley was writing brilliant travel letters, the personal Shelley was expressing his sorrow in nearly every poem that he wrote. These poems, raked into one heap," were "The Past," "On a Faded Violet," "Invocation to Misery," "Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples," and "Lift not the Painted Veil Which Those Who Live." "The Past" describes the changing of ". . . the happy hours / Which we buried in Love's sweet bowers" to sorrow, in which memories make a tomb of the heart and regrets glide through the gloom of the spirit. The theme of the poem is that ". . . joy, once lost, is pain." In view of the circumstances, "The Past" would seem to be a direct remonstrance of Mary for her forgetting of the happy past in which they had loved and for her denying of ". . . the hopes that yet remain." He expresses this same theme in "On a Faded Violet," which he sent in March, 1820, to a friend with the note, ". . . if you tell no one whose they [the verses] are, you are welcome to them."⁸⁸ This lyric could be an allegorizing of Mary's apathy toward Shelley with a parallel between "the shrivelled, lifeless, vacant form" of the flower, which will not revive despite the

⁸⁸Shelley, op. cit., II, 175.

poet's tears and sighs, and the cold, brooding wife who refuses to respond to her husband.

"Invocation to Misery" can also be read as a representation of the relationship between Shelley and Mary, with Mary's being addressed as "Misery." She is described as a ". . . coy, unwilling bride, / Mourning in thy robe of pride," whose ". . . brow / Is endiademed with woe." The poet requests her to make the best of an evil lot, since they two must live together in the same house for years to come, and tells her they will love, ". . . if love can live when pleasure dies." He, then, invites her to be his bride on the bridal bed of death and to be happy while the rest of the world passes by.

The last two poems of this year, although they are intensely personal, are more general and do not express, so much as the three previous ones, Shelley's relation with Mary at this time. In "Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples," the poet contrasts the beauty and harmony to be found in nature with his loneliness and depression. He laments that he has not hope, health, peace, calm, fame, power, love, or leisure. His life, in contrast to the lives of those around him, is one of care which he is forced to bear alone. The height of the poet's dejection comes in the final stanza in which he describes himself as ". . . one / Whom men love not." The sonnet, "Lift not the Painted

"Veil Which Those Who Live," expresses his general disappointment and disillusionment with life and advances the belief that, although life itself is unreal and deceptive, what lies beyond it may be even more deceptive, so that it is perhaps better for one to remain with known illusions than to face unknown reality. The poet describes his own lifelong search for love and his subsequent disappointment and writes that he moved as

A splendor among shadows, a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

These final two poems are a summation of Shelley's theme of despair in 1818, and although his estrangement from Mary may have been the immediate impulse for an expression of his dejection, his despondency, as expressed in these two verses, was the culmination of a great many disillusioning experiences. Shelley expressed in these poems his conviction, the result of the earlier events of his life, that he was condemned, persecuted, and fated always to meet with disappointment, as well as abuse, in his relations with others.

By the indirect testimony of Shelley and Mary, then, this group of poems, in general, is to be thought of as being autobiographical and could not apply to any other specific situation at this time except their relations in the fall and winter of 1818.⁸⁹ Mary sank into an apathy of

⁸⁹White, op. cit., II, 54.

grief which desolated Shelley, and her early antagonism reveals that she probably held him indirectly responsible for Clara's death.⁹⁰ Covering three important months in Shelley's life, the most significant circumstances have been concealed in highly subjective poems, the meaning of which was deliberately obscured by Shelley and Mary. Neither Mary's journal nor Shelley's letters, both of which were strangely impersonal, imply anything of the unusual relationship which was concealed, but which, nevertheless, dominated his poetry.⁹¹ In the advertisement for Rosalind and Helen, dated December 20, 1818, Shelley paid tribute to his wife, but only two days later he wrote to Hunt:

I never will be a party in making my private affairs or those of others to be topics of general discussion; who can know them but the actors? and if they have erred, or often when they have not erred, is there not pain enough to punish them?⁹²

It is also evident that Mary associated the five poems with herself, since they appear to have been the ones which Shelley had hidden from her for fear of hurting her and since in her edition of his poetry they are not grouped together, as Shelley intended them to be, but, instead, are

⁹⁰Loc. cit.

⁹¹White, op. cit., II, 70.

⁹²Shelley, op. cit., II, 66.

widely separated.⁹³ In 1821, when Shelley showed his dejection poems to Medwin, he accounted for them as being inspired by a young woman who had followed him to Switzerland and later to Italy in the hope of being his lover and his disciple and who had died in Naples.⁹⁴ Her death would certainly have been recorded in obituaries, official death records, and English consul reports, but there are no traces of her.⁹⁵ She apparently never existed, and it is likely that Shelley invented her to mislead Medwin about the real cause of his despondency.

Shelley's depression continued during the first part of 1819, as is evident from a January letter to Thomas Love Peacock:

O, if I had health, & strength, & equal spirits
 what boundless intellectual improvement might I
 not gather in this wonderful country! At present
 I write but poetry, & little of that.⁹⁶

After moving to Rome in March, however, Shelley's health greatly improved, and his life was less solitary. Mary took more interest in social life and found Rome a

⁹³White, op. cit., II, 66.

⁹⁴Ibid., I, 436-7.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 437.

⁹⁶Shelley, op. cit., II, 70.

"perpetual enchantment."⁹⁷ The former estrangement was much lessened in the spring when both were in better health and spirits, and only one event occurred in 1819 to dispel Shelley's happiness: his son William died on June 7.⁹⁸ All of the improvement noted in his health in the previous month was now gone, as he stated in a letter to Hogg:

I had been slowly recovering a certain degree of health until this event, which has left me in a very weak state,--and Mary bears it, as you may naturally imagine worse than I do.⁹⁹

William's death, however, did not produce in Shelley or in Mary a feeling of alienation; although he felt helpless to aid Mary in her depression and was conscious of a barrier between them, he was occupied with his writing, and by August both he and Mary were restored to health and good spirits.¹⁰⁰

Shelley was much more resilient after this particular misfortune than after the death of Clara and became absorbed in his work, so that the year 1819 has been considered the annus mirabilis of his poetic career. Besides his shorter poems, he completed The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound.

⁹⁷White, op. cit., II, 89.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁹Shelley, op. cit., II, 104.

¹⁰⁰White, op. cit., II, 108.

Apparently he was satisfied with his work and wrote of his Prometheus Unbound: "It is, in my judgement, of a higher character than anything I have yet attempted, and is perhaps less an imitation than anything that has gone before it."¹⁰¹ Later he maintained: "My Prometheus is the best thing I ever wrote."¹⁰² In the fall, he was concerned with political events in England and wrote The Masque of Anarchy and six other poems, which he wished to publish as a direct inspiration for the common people in the revolution which he imagined was coming.¹⁰³ There were few personal poems in this year, and he had, as he wrote in November, ". . . deserted the odorous gardens of literature to journey across the great sandy desert of Politics."¹⁰⁴

For the year 1819, there are only six despondent poems, five of them fragments, of which three are laments for his son William and were intended to form a long poem in his memory. There is nothing particularly remarkable in these fragments; Shelley's grief is the natural one of a father who has lost a son. The other fragments are

¹⁰¹Shelley, op. cit., II, 116.

¹⁰²ibid., p. 164.

¹⁰³White, op. cit., II, 105.

¹⁰⁴Shelley, op. cit., II, 50.

entitled "To-Day" and "Is Not To-Day Enough?" Both assert a reliance upon the present moment and a refusal to think of "dim tomorrow" or the "darkness of the day to come." The poet's view of life is tragic, and he envisions a succession of days filled with discord and sorrow. There is no apparent reason for Shelley's hopeless despondency in these two poems and in "Time Long Past" except William's death. In the latter poem, the poet mourns for the past, which he describes as "the ghost of a dear friend dead," and states that he feels "regret, almost remorse" for

A tone which is now forever fled,
A hope which is now forever past,
A love so sweet it could not last.

In the last stanza he likens the past to ". . . a child's beloved corse / A father watches." The only other possible explanation for the tone of the lyrics could be that they were composed during the first part of the year when Shelley's relationship with his wife was still strained. His dejection over this relationship may, indeed, be expressed in the last four lines of "Is Not To-Day Enough?":

Few flowers grow upon thy wintry way;
And who waits for thee in that cheerless
home
Whence thou hast fled, whither thou must
return
Charged with the load that makes thee
faint and mourn?

During 1820, he was distressed by many of the matters which had oppressed him in earlier years and were to

continue to oppress him until his death: ill health, solitude, financial worries, and the belief that his writing was unrecognized and had failed in its purpose. The ill health brought on by the harsh winter in Florence continued after he moved to Pisa in the spring, and the Shelleys did not enter into society.¹⁰⁵ Their correspondence was also restricted, and in his letters he constantly referred to his illness.¹⁰⁶ In May he wrote, however, that his health was greatly benefited by his residence in Italy.

The most distressing incident of the year occurred in June, when a previously dismissed servant attempted to blackmail him. Despondency is evident in a June letter to the Gisbornes:

What remains to me? Domestic peace and fame?
 You will laugh when you hear me talk of the latter;
 indeed it is only a shadow. The seeking of a
 sympathy with the unborn and the unknown is a
 feeble mood of allaying the love within us; and
 even that is beyond the grasp of so weak an aspirant
 as I . . . I am very nervous, but better in general
 health. We have had a most infernal business with
 Paolo whom, however, we have succeeded in crushing
 . . . I send you some verses I wrote the first day
 I came, which show you that I struggle with
 despondency.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵White, op. cit., II, 178.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 182.

¹⁰⁷Shelley, op. cit., II, 106-7.

In July, in another letter to the Gisbornes he referred to Paolo's attempted extortion with the bitter comment: "An ounce of civet good apothecary to sweeten this dunghill of a world."¹⁰⁸

August, 1820, marked the end of the period of Shelley's vigorous poetry begun in the spring of 1819. The poems of the next six months were few and melancholy, expressing the despondency theme substantiated in his letters and conversations. In the comments of Mary and Thomas Medwin, as well as in Shelley's letters, one discovers an important reason for this despondency.

After arriving in Pisa for a visit, Medwin became severely ill on November 5, and for the next six weeks Shelley nursed him.¹⁰⁹ Medwin thought that Shelley was dwelling upon the idea of suicide at this time and described the poet's melancholy moods as "most distressing to witness," a complete "prostration of spirits."¹¹⁰ When Medwin had read Shelley's poetry and commented quite favorably upon it, Shelley replied that he was " . . . disgusted with writing, and were it not for an irresistible impulse, that predominate [d his] better reason, should discontinue so

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰⁹White, op. cit., II, 231.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 236.

doing."¹¹¹

Shelley evidently felt profoundly the attack upon him, both as a man and as a poet, and he was beginning to believe it futile to continue to write without sympathy. Earlier, he had written to Hunt:

. . . I am an outcast from human society; my name is execrated by all who understand its entire import,--by those very beings whose happiness I ardently desire.--I am a object of compassion to a few more benevolent than the rest, all else abhor & avoid me . . . I am undeceived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest or substantially to improve mankind . . . Perhaps I should have shrunk from persisting in the task which I had undertaken in early life, of opposing myself, in these evil times & among these evil tongues to what I esteem misery & vice.¹¹²

He had expressed this same sentiment in the previous year in a letter to Peacock, in which he stated that he was regarded by all who knew or heard of him, except possibly five individuals, as " . . . a rare prodigy of crime & pollution whose look even might infect."¹¹³ In November, 1820, he wrote to Peacock, again complaining of a lack of literary appreciation:

. . . the reception the public have given me might go far enough to damp any man's enthusiasm

¹¹¹Quoted in White, op. cit., II, 231.

¹¹²Shelley, op. cit., I, 517.

¹¹³Ibid., II, 94.

. . . I can compare my experience in this respect to nothing but a series of wet blankets.¹¹⁴

Mary's note on the poems of 1820 confirms the belief that Shelley felt deeply his lack of public recognition as a writer, describing her attempt to persuade him to enhance his popularity by writing upon more publicly accepted subjects:

I believed that he would obtain a greater mastery over his own powers, and greater happiness in his mind, if public applause crowned his endeavors . . . Shelley did not expect sympathy and approbation from the public; but the want of it took away a portion of the ardour that ought to have sustained him while writing. He was thrown on his own resources and on the inspiration of his own soul, and wrote because his mind overflowed, without the hope of being appreciated . . . That he felt these things [the attack upon his character and writings] deeply cannot be doubted, though he armed himself with the consciousness of acting from a lofty and heroic sense of right. The truth burst from his heart sometimes in solitude, and he would write a few unfinished verses that showed that he felt the sting.¹¹⁵

One of these unfinished poems is "Alas! This Is Not What I Thought Life Was," an expression of his recognition that he had to bear " . . . scorn, fear, and hate, a woful mass!" He had known, he writes, that the world was filled with evil so that he could not expect to pass "through the rugged glen" unscathed. He had, therefore, armed himself

¹¹⁴Ibid., II, 245.

¹¹⁵Mary Shelley, op. cit., II, 54.

with "calm endurance" against such attack, but he implies that he had not expected the attack to be as severe or prolonged. This bitter, despairing verse was the result of his increasing conviction that he was the victim of unwarranted persecution and that men were often evil. Here, he also expressed his deep feeling of unjust neglect and lack of recognition and his belief in himself as a failure, in as much as he lacked a sympathetic audience.

To the next year belongs the largest group of Shelley's despondent lyrics. The mood of his poetry in 1821 can be explained, to some degree, by several new circumstances in his life. In November, 1820, Shelley was introduced to Teresa, or Emilia, Viviani, who had been placed by her father, the governor of Pisa, in the Convent of St. Anna, where she was to remain until a suitor was found who would marry her without a dowry.¹¹⁶ For the next ten months, the Shelleys and Claire frequently corresponded and visited with her.¹¹⁷ Emilia was beautiful, intelligent, and sensitive, and for the previous three years had been held virtually a prisoner in the convent school. These characteristics combined to make Emilia the person most likely, except

¹¹⁶White, op. cit., II, 247.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 248.

for Mary, to arouse in Shelley an intense enthusiasm.¹¹⁸ He could not perceive that Emilia was unquestioning in religious matters, that she studied little, that her reactions were intuitive instead of philosophical, or that she was not interested in the cause of any freedom except her own.¹¹⁹ Instead, she was for him what seemed to be the ideal solution to his desire for complete personal sympathy and close spiritual kinship, and he wrote Epipsychidion in celebration of what he believed to be the final realization of this ideal. He was inevitably to be disappointed in Emilia, as he had been in other women he had known, and his sense of disappointment was made more bitter by his despondency over other matters.

Since he had already felt himself neglected as an author, a feeling that he had failed as a writer to gain sympathy for his ideals gradually became a conviction. In his letters in May and July written to Byron to suggest a meeting, he commented dejectedly upon his own poetry and its lack of success.¹²⁰ He constantly viewed himself as a victim of persecution, as having been ruined by reviewers, from whom

¹¹⁸Loc. cit.

¹¹⁹White, op. cit., II, 254.

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 289.

he expected only neglect or abuse.¹²¹ In the spring of 1821, he wrote Adonais, which he believed to be the final test of his ability to win public acceptance: " . . . if Adonais had no success, & excited no interest what incentive can I have to write?"¹²² He described it as "a highly wrought piece of art" and wrote that he would be surprised if it were not immortal.¹²³ The poem, however, was probably fated to receive adverse criticism, because the reviewers considered it a declaration of war in its indictment of them as the assassins of Keats and even of the poet himself, who " . . . in another's fate now wept his own" (XXIV.3). Shelley's letters of August reveal his bitterness over the reception of Adonais and express his resolution to forsake the literary profession. He wrote to Peacock: "I write nothing and probably shall write no more. It offends me to see my name classed among those who have no name."¹²⁴ Six days later, in a letter to Mary, he stated that his good impulses and love had been the cause of all kinds of

¹²¹Ibid., p. 296.

¹²²Shelley, op. cit., II, 382.

¹²³Ibid., p. 294, 365.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 331.

mischief and expressed his great desire to desert all human society, to " . . . shut upon [his] retreat the floodgates of the world.-- [he] would read no reviews, and talk with no authors."¹²⁵

His bitterness and disillusionment with men were increased in August upon his hearing from Byron of a scandalous rumor involving an affair with Claire. Paolo and his wife had told the Hoppners, who in turn had informed Byron, that Claire had given birth in 1818 to a child whose father was Shelley and that Shelley had either killed the baby or had abandoned it.¹²⁶ The effect upon Shelley of this rumor and its belief was profound. He wrote Mary informing her of the incident:

Lord Byron has told me of a circumstance that shocks me exceedingly; because it exhibits a degree of desperate and wicked malice for which I am at a loss to account. When I hear such things my patience and my philosophy are put to a severe proof, whilst I refrain from seeking out some obscure hiding place where the countenance of man may never meet me more . . . Imagine my despair of good-- imagine how it is possible that one of so weak and sensitive a nature as mine can run further the gauntlet through this hellish society of men.¹²⁷

Shelley was most affected by the fact that those who had known him personally should think that he had destroyed

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 339.

¹²⁶White, op. cit., II, 307.

¹²⁷Shelley, op. cit., II, 317, 319.

or deserted a child, and on the next day he, again, wrote to Mary:

A certain degree and a certain kind of infamy is to be borne, and, in fact, is the best compliment which an exalted nature can receive from the filthy world of which it is Hell to be a part--but this sort of thing exceeds the measure.¹²⁸

Immediately following his anxiety over Adonais and the scandal involving him came the final disillusionment with Emilia in August, causing him to lose almost all of his faith in men and to despair of ever attaining to happiness in life. Emilia was married on September 5, and after her marriage, Shelley was " . . . in a sort of morbid quietness."¹²⁹ He realized that her marriage was inevitable, but the spiritual separation it caused represented for him an idealism crushed by reality and added to his disillusionment with life. Five days before the marriage, Emilia had further wounded him by requesting a considerable sum of money for a friend.¹³⁰ The result of Emilia's marriage and conduct was that of an extreme depression and despondency which lasted, in a varying degree, until his death. In February, 1822, Epipsyichidion was "suddenly withdrawn" from circulation, and nine months after the wedding, he wrote to the Gisbornes:

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 320.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 380.

¹³⁰White, op. cit., II, 323.

The "Epipsychidion" I cannot look at; the person whom it celebrates was a cloud instead of a Juno; and poor Ixion starts from the centaur that was the offspring of his own embrace . . . It is an idealized history of my life & feelings. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, & I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh & blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal.¹³¹

The extremely disappointing events of 1821 are reflected in the largest group of despondent lyrics which Shelley ever wrote in a single year: "Dirge for the Year," "Time," "Rarely, Rarely, Comest Thou," "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast," "Mutability," "Far, Far Away, O Ye," "Remembrance," "The Serpent Is Shut out from Paradise," "To-Morrow," "If I Walk in Autumn's Even," and "A Lament." Of these, all except "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast," "Remembrance," and "A Lament" seem to express a general despondency, caused by the vicissitudes, pain, and disappointments of life, heightened by the poet's sense of the transient quality of all worldly objects or emotions, particularly those associated with happiness and joy. These lyrics have their basis in the accumulated effect upon Shelley of all his misfortunes, of all his disappointing experiences, which combined to crush him under the weight of a persistent, oppressive hopelessness and despair. Apparently he thought of the

¹³¹Shelley, op. cit., II, 434.

events of the year as a culmination of all the disillusionments and distresses of his entire life.

Three poems, however, seem specifically to have been inspired by his disillusionment with Emilia. "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast" and "Remembrance" were most probably written shortly before her marriage, and "A Lament" soon afterward.¹³² The theme of "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast" is the relation between the passion and tenderness of love, its combination of violence and gentleness. Passion is associated with an exalted, ecstatic state, and tenderness with truth. Tenderness, laments the poet, does not always last when passion ends. In the first stanza, he considers the relation of tenderness and truth in general terms. In the second stanza, he is more specific: the loss of passion is that of the poet's lover, who has lost tenderness as well. The poet, however, has lost neither, but is willing to express only tenderness. Whatever hope may have been suggested in the first two stanzas is denied in the last, in which there is a return to the more generalized statement in the opening of the poem. A conventional image contrasts the cyclical history of nature with the linear history of man. This verse, as evidenced by its theme, expresses Shelley's disappointment because Emilia no longer felt her former spiritual kinship with him.

¹³²White, op. cit., II, 322-3.

"Remembrance" was sent to Jane Williams with a note:

If this melancholy old song suits any of your tunes, or any that humor of the moment may dictate, you are welcome to it. Do not say it is mine to anyone, even if you think so; indeed it is from the torn leaf of a book out of date.¹³³

The verse deals with the sorrow of the poet caused by the departure of his lover. The first stanza expresses grief that the loved one has come and gone and that ". . . I am left lone, alone." In the second stanza, since his sorrow cannot be relieved, the poet becomes bitter: ". . . the wild swan youth is fain / To fly with thee, false as thou." References to Emilia are most specific in the third stanza, with an allusion to her marriage:

Lilies for a bridal bed,
Roses for a matron's head,
Violets for a maiden dead--
Pansies let my flowers be.

This lyric appears, then, to have been an expression of Shelley's despair when his hopes for an ideal relationship with Emilia had been shattered. He concludes: "Let no friend, however dear, / Waste one hope, one fear for me."

"A Lament" seems to express a general despondency caused by his disappointment over all of life and to express a conviction that he will never again know the glory and joy once known. However, a specific allusion to Emilia

¹³³Shelley, op. cit., II, 386-7.

could be intended in the last stanza. The joy which " . . . has taken flight" could easily refer to the mutual delight that Shelley and Emilia had found in their relationship. This relationship could also be alluded to in the stirring of the poet's " . . . faint heart with grief, but with delight / No more,--oh, never more!" These despondent lyrics of 1821, then, were occasioned by Shelley's disillusioning experiences of the year, which combined to deepen his conviction that men were untrustworthy and often malicious and that life could be best regarded with despair.

Although Shelley's health was greatly improved in 1822 so that he seemed happier than at any other time during his stay in Italy, he was, nevertheless, more disturbed by several worries and tensions than he appeared to be. It is apparent that Shelley continued to feel the futility of any further writing in what he believed to be a spiritual isolation. In the previous October he had stated that Hellas had been " . . . written without much care, and in one of those few moments of enthusiasm which now seldom visit [ed him]." ¹³⁴ In December, he had written Claire:

I am employed in nothing--I read--but I have no spirits for serious composition.--I have no confidence, and to write in solitude or put

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 406.

forth thoughts without sympathy is unprofitable vanity.¹³⁵

This same frame of mind prompted him to write to the Gisbornes in the following June:

I write little now. It is impossible to compose except under the strong excitement of an assurance of finding sympathy in what you write. Imagine Demosthenes reciting a Phillipic to the waves of the Atlantic . . . I do not go on with "Charles the First." I feel too little certainty of the future, and too little satisfaction with regard to the past, to undertake any subject seriously and deeply.¹³⁶

Shelley clearly thought that he had failed as a writer because he had not found a sympathetic audience:

Mine is a life of failures. Peacock says my poetry is composed of day-dreams and nightmares; and Leigh Hunt does not think it good enough for The Examiner. Jefferson Hogg says all poetry is inverted sense, and consequently nonsense. Every man should attempt to do something. Poetry was the rage of the day, and I racked my imagination to be a poet. I wrote, and the critics denounced me as a mischievous visionary, and my friends said that I had mistaken my vocation, that my poetry was mere rhapsody of words; that I was soaring in the blue regions of the air, disconnected from all human sympathy.¹³⁷

In the same month, not many days before his death, he wrote to Trelawny requesting some prussic acid: ". . . I have no intention of suicide at present, but I confess

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 368.

¹³⁶Ibid., 436.

¹³⁷Quoted in Ivan Roe, Shelley: The Last Phase, p. 16.

it would be a comfort to me to hold in my possession that golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest."¹³⁸ In June, he continued to be disturbed by visions which had first beset him in May. At one time, he saw a naked child resembling Allegra, who had died in April, rise from the sea and clap her hands at him.¹³⁹ On another occasion, he met his own figure, who demanded of him, "How long do you mean to be content?"¹⁴⁰ According to one critic, there was an adequate reason for Shelley's mental disturbances, weariness of spirit, and his sense of futility:

. . . [he] had, as he thought, failed wholly as a poet. The world had little use for him or his beliefs and was seemingly indifferent to the beauty which he gave it. He had reason to regard himself as a failure and unwanted . . . if a man's work is not wanted and if he gets much pain and little pleasure from the daily round of life, what reason has he to go on?¹⁴¹

Shelley's despondency is substantiated by the two melancholy lyrics which he wrote during his last months. "When the Lamp Is Shattered" marks his return to the mutability theme dealt with in a number of earlier poems. The particular theme is the death of love. The comparisons

¹³⁸Shelley, op. cit., II, 433.

¹³⁹White, op. cit., II, 368.

¹⁴⁰Loc. cit.

¹⁴¹Carl Grabo, The Magic Plant, The Growth of Shelley's Thought, p. 413.

of love to a lamp, a cloud, and a lute emphasize the impermanence of human sensation and the limitations of the memory. Love turns to lust and barren isolation, and after the mingling of hearts, the spirit fails first, while the passion alone remains. The heart, says the poet, is the cradle of love, its home, and at last its bier. When the passions themselves finally fail, the heart falls apart, and nothing remains but nakedness, scorn, desolation, and winter. His other melancholy lyric, "A Dirge," ends upon a similar note of hopelessness. The poet calls upon the wind, which ". . . moanest loud / Grief too sad for song," to ". . . wail, for the world's wrong." These two somber poems were apparently written in the same mood of despondency that continued from 1821 until Shelley's death. He expressed in the poetry of his last years all of the despair which he had increasingly come to feel so deeply as a result of the frustrations and unhappiness of his life.

In conclusion, then, the mood of Shelley's short despondency lyrics from 1817 to 1822 was, to some extent, the result of the events of his life upon his extremely sensitive personality. It seemed to him that all of his experiences had revealed that he was unjustly condemned and persecuted by all men, who were predominantly evil, that he was deceived and disillusioned in his relations with others, both in friendship and love, and that he had

failed as a writer to gain appreciation or to realize a fulfillment of his ideals. He expressed these convictions in the despairing, melancholy verses written during the last years of his life when he was further oppressed by illness, solitude, financial worries, and deaths of loved ones.

CHAPTER II

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

The tone of many of Shelley's short despondent lyrics can be explained, to a certain extent, by a knowledge of the unhappy, even tragic, events of his life, and these poems have a specific biographical basis. Not all of his lyrics, however, have such a strictly biographical significance, and even those which were occasioned by the distressing circumstances of his life cannot be explained wholly as the result of these circumstances. The explanation for Shelley's despondency must ultimately be discovered in his philosophy. Having an extreme intellectual curiosity, a scholarly thirst for knowledge, a faculty for rigorous thought, and a capacity for deep reflection, he was constantly seeking to discover the meaning of human life and world existence. A disciplined ethical and metaphysical thinker, he was, therefore, a potentially serious philosophical poet. Striving throughout his life to find a reason for his experiences and for those of all men, he eventually developed a philosophy to explain existence and expressed this philosophy in his poetry. In his mature philosophy lies the explanation for the despondency that is revealed in his short lyrics.

The first two intellectual influences in Shelley's life were those of science and Gothic fiction. At Syon

House Academy, through the lectures of Adam Walker, a self-taught naturalist and inventor of scientific toys, he was introduced to the wonders of science, and he became entranced by Walker's scientific apparatus and wide range of scientific and pseudo-scientific knowledge.¹⁴² Shelley began to conduct chemical and electrical experiments and became interested in the telescope and microscope.¹⁴³ At Syon, he also read with enthusiasm a great number of the extravagant thrillers and horror novels popular at the time, in particular the works of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe and George Lewis.¹⁴⁴ At Eton, he continued his interest in science and Gothic fiction, as substantiated by his vacation experiences at Field Place.¹⁴⁵

His intellectual enthusiasms, however, were changed at Oxford when he was influenced by Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Having little knowledge of the physical sciences and no interest in them, Hogg deliberately attempted to interest Shelley in the ethical and moral sciences. After the first few meetings of these two, Shelley's enthusiasm for scientific

¹⁴²White, op. cit., I, 22.

¹⁴³Loc. cit.

¹⁴⁴White, op. cit., I, 24.

¹⁴⁵Joseph Barrell, Shelley and the Thought of His Time, p. 57.

experiments began to lessen, and the two men began an intensive program of reading philosophical works, including Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Hume's Essays, and the works of the popular materialistic French philosophers.¹⁴⁶ At Oxford also Shelley first read some of the dialogues of Plato, although not in the original, but in translations, and he was particularly impressed by the Phaedo and its doctrine that all knowledge consists of reminiscences of things learned in a former existence.¹⁴⁷ Plato's philosophy, ultimately to become Shelley's own, did not have a profound effect upon his mind during his time at Oxford, however, since it was overshadowed by his interest in the materialistic and rationalistic determinism of Godwin and the French philosophers. Between 1810 and 1812, during which time he embraced the tenets of optimistic materialism, he rejected Plato as an idle dreamer and even doubted the value of classical learning in general.¹⁴⁸

In 1812, however, he read with care and admiration Berkeley's works and Drummond's Academical Questions. The idealism of the two writers, closely related to Platonic

¹⁴⁶Hogg, op. cit., pp. 38-9, 71.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 76-7.

¹⁴⁸James A. Notopoulos, The Platonism of Shelley, p. 38.

idealism, was of the utmost importance in effecting Shelley's philosophical conversion from materialism to idealism, and it induced him later to be receptive to Platonic philosophy.¹⁴⁹ Shelley began, then, with a belief in materialism, which, however, was only temporary and which was qualified by his true inclination toward immaterialism. Queen Mab, his first major attempt in poetry to synthesize his ethical, political, and metaphysical views, was not successful, because he had not yet discovered an all-embracing system under which he could arrange his often contradictory convictions. Although the dominant tone of the poem is that of eighteenth-century radical, materialistic, and necessitarian thought, the work also contains idealistic principles, and Shelley seems to have been unaware of the extreme self-contradictions which, at this time, were involved in his thought.

Plato offered him a unified, systematic philosophy which, because it suited his fundamentally idealistic nature and because its answer to metaphysical questions seemed in accord with his own tentative conclusions, he accepted with few qualifications. Although Shelley had early begun the study of Greek, he had developed little, if any, interest in Greek literature or philosophy

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 121, 151.

before he met Thomas Love Peacock, who stimulated and guided Shelley's classical learning and who was responsible in 1817 for the reawakening of his dormant interest in Plato.¹⁵⁰ Shelley met Peacock in London in November, 1812, and as early as December he was requesting a large number of classical works which reflected Peacock's interest and which must have been ordered at Peacock's suggestion.¹⁵¹ From 1813 to 1817, Shelley then read consistently and systematically in the Greek authors, and although there is no evidence that he read Plato at this time, his increasing interest in Greek eventually was to lead him to read Plato in the original, and he was influenced by Platonic thought indirectly through his other reading.¹⁵²

In 1817, Shelley entered upon the second period of his study of Plato. During the first period of his school year, he had read the dialogues in inferior translations; during the second period, from 1817 to his death, he read Plato in the original and eventually translated several of the dialogues.¹⁵³ The first of the dialogues which he read was the Symposium, in August, 1817, and after completing

¹⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 39-40.

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 29.

it, he then read most of the Phaedrus and other works whose titles are not known.¹⁵⁴ After his arrival in Italy in 1818, Shelley translated the Symposium in July and read portions of the Phaedrus in August.¹⁵⁵ He began the Republic in October, but discontinued it in November.¹⁵⁶ In 1819, however, his reading in Plato was not as diversified and intense, and his only recorded reading was the Republic in October and November.¹⁵⁷ In 1820, the year of his most extensive reading in Plato, he completed the Republic, began reading the Phaedrus in February, finishing it in May, and read the Phaedo between May and September and translated parts of it.¹⁵⁸ In 1821, he read the Ion, the Laws, the Crito, and Gorgias and translated the Ion and Plato's epigrams.¹⁵⁹ His study of Plato continued in 1822 with the same intensity, although no specific readings are recorded except the Gorgias.¹⁶⁰

Shelley's reading of Plato was remarkable for its

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 35, 59.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 71.

depth and range. The major source for the dates and titles of his reading is Mary's journal, but because it is deficient and because Shelley left no complete record of his reading, it is probable that the list of his reading, wide as it is, is still incomplete. Furthermore, in addition to the dialogues themselves, of which the Symposium, Phaedrus, Phaedo, Ion, and Republic had primary influence upon his poetic thought and expression, Shelley was influenced by Plato indirectly through his other reading.¹⁶¹ The scope of his study extended to almost every period, nation, and author influenced by Platonic tradition in aesthetics, religion, cosmology, and metaphysics, so that he was subject to the influence of Platonic philosophy even at times when he was not reading the dialogues.¹⁶²

Plato's philosophy presented him with two worlds. According to Plato, there is the material world of natural phenomena in which all men must live. This world he termed, at various times, the world of particulars, of images, of appearances, or of becoming. It is a world which exists in time and space and is, thus, temporal, changing, and imperfect. In contrast, there is the world of forms, of ideas, or of being. This world is outside time and space.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 78.

and is eternal, unchanging, universal, and perfect. The superior world of ideas or forms is the only real world, the objects of the world of particulars or images being merely shadows or inferior copies of the ideas or forms in the real world. These physical objects may imitate, approximate, or partake of the reality of the ideal world, but they can never fully realize its perfection. There is, therefore, an immanent-transcendent relationship existing between the two worlds which can be achieved only by the human soul, which perceives in the phenomena of the physical world the shadows of the ideal essences of truth, beauty, and goodness, found in the transcendent world of forms or ideas.

Plato asserted that man's soul is able to have such an intuition of forms or ideas because it existed elsewhere before it was imprisoned in the human body and forced to exist in the world of particulars or images. In this prenatal state, man's soul dwelt in the pure, ideal world of forms. The descent of the soul into a body and into the world of particulars made the soul forget these forms, but occasionally earthly experience stimulates a soul to recall some form which it knew in its pre-existent state. Although the soul cannot apprehend these essences perfectly until it is delivered by death from the restrictions of the body to which it is tied, Plato believed that man still attempts to pattern his life as closely as possible after

the ideals in the world of forms which he knows exists because of his apprehension of them in his earthly existence in the form of shadows. This attempt makes possible man's moral and spiritual regeneration, but it is the only means to such a regeneration. Man can attain to a certain degree of perfection if he frees his soul from physical limitations so that it can perceive, although imperfectly, the essences of the ideal reality which, once apprehended, can then be used as a standard after which man is to shape his existence.

This, then, was Plato's idealistic philosophy in which Shelley became steeped through his program of reading and study. Platonic philosophy was immediately attractive to Shelley, because it stated that there did exist, somewhere in an ideal world, eternal, immutable, perfect, and universal realities. Furthermore, it maintained that man could partake to some extent of the ideal reality and perfection of this world, depending upon the degree to which he was able to perceive the essences of the ideal world of forms or images and to pattern his existence upon this ideal standard. Man's task, therefore, was the pursuit of the ideal.

Adopting the Platonic philosophy, Shelley dedicated himself to a pursuit of this ideal, seeking to obtain it for himself and to enable the rest of mankind to attain to it, also. His personal search took the form of the pursuit of the Ideal or Intellectual Beauty whose shadow, as

described in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," visits the world too infrequently and which Shelley conceived most often as manifesting itself in woman. His search, both in his life and his poetry, was for a physical counterpart of Ideal Beauty, an earthly prototype of his own platonic soul.¹⁶³ In conceiving of woman as the symbolic incarnation of Ideal Love and Beauty, he sought a human embodiment of the ideal.

His quest, which began early in his life, is first poetically revealed in Alastor. Although there are apparent inconsistencies within both the preface and the poem, and although the two also appear to contradict each other somewhat, Alastor may be interpreted as the story of a youth who, in his enthusiasm for natural beauty, knowledge, and learning, neglected human love and sympathy, until he suddenly realized his need for human companionship. Content no longer with intellectual pursuits, he then united in a single image all the qualities which could be desired by a poet, a philosopher, and a lover. Believing that his vision had a basis in reality and that there was, indeed, a human being who corresponded to it, he searched in vain for the living embodiment of his conception. Realizing that the infinite could not be enclosed in a mortal form and that

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 189.

the perfect creation of his mind was not to be found in life, he died of disappointment too great for his sensitive spirit to bear.

This same search for a human embodiment of Ideal Beauty was also to be the theme of Shelley's projected Prince Athanase, of which only a portion was written. According to his wife, however, Shelley intended that the prince should seek throughout the world for the one he could love and that he should be deceived in his search, mistaking a false love for a true one, and should, therefore, die of disappointment upon making this discovery.¹⁶⁴ His true love, however, was to have come to him on his deathbed.¹⁶⁵ In the fragment, the prince was shown to be unhappy despite his knowledge and his love for mankind. Although he did not know the reason for his discontent, it was the result of the same vacancy of spirit and desire to commune with a being similar to himself that was felt by the poet of Alastor.¹⁶⁶

Shelley's theme of the search for a woman who would embody Ideal Beauty is again expressed in the dedication to The Revolt of Islam. Here, Shelley revealed that his

¹⁶⁴Mary Shelley, op. cit., III, 78.

¹⁶⁵Loc. cit.

¹⁶⁶Frederick L. Jones, "The Vision Theme in Shelley's Alastor and Related Works," Studies in Philology, XLIV (January, 1947), 114.

search among mortals had been extensive and that he had been disappointed several times, but that he believed he had at last found an embodiment in Mary. He was to feel disappointed again, however, before Emilia Viviani was the climax of his attempts to grasp Ideal Beauty in his life and his poetry. The quest for such an ideal and his failure to find it run a parallel course both in his life and his poetry. In Emilia, he thought he had found the earthly symbol of Ideal Beauty for which he had been seeking with various degrees of failure, and in the opening stanzas of Epipsychidion, he described this search for a prototype of the vision which he had experienced in his youth: "In many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol of my thought" (68-70). On several occasions, he had thought that he had found the mortal image, but each time he had been deceived until, at last, he had succeeded when he met Emilia.

In reality, however, he had failed again, as he was soon to become aware. This failure, like the previous ones, was inevitable, since he rarely thought of a woman in her limited physical being, but endowed her with ideal qualities. He sought always a human prototype of Ideal Beauty, but after his last disillusionment with Emilia, he no longer expected to find the vision embodied in a living person. He reached the conclusion that such a prototype was not to be found on earth, and he acknowledged his error in the

letter to the Gisbornes and in his "Hymn to Pan" and "The Zucca." In the former poem, he stated the realization of his failure: "I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed. / Gods and men, we are all deluded thus." In the latter, he expressed his discovery that the earthly world does not contain the perfect, ideal reality for which his Platonic soul was seeking;

I loved--oh, no, I mean not one of ye,
Or any earthly one, though ye are dear
As human heart to human heart may be;
I loved I know not what--but this low
 sphere,
And all that it contains, contains not
 thee,
Thou, whom, seen nowhere, I feel every-
 where.

This conclusion is the one reached earlier in Alastor and is, indeed, the very conclusion of Platonism itself, which states that the ideal, perfect reality exists only in the world of forms, the objects of the natural world being only shadows of the forms. In the natural objects, man's soul may perceive shadows of the ideal forms, but the objects themselves are necessarily imperfect.

Shelley sought an ultimately unattainable ideal not only for himself, but for others as well. He tried to reform the world through the moral and spiritual regeneration which Plato had stated possible if man was able to perceive the essences of the ideal world of forms or ideas and to pattern his existence upon this ideal standard. The way

to reform mankind, therefore, lay in the conversion of man's soul, since it was the soul alone which could apprehend the ideal. In 1812, influenced by materialistic philosophy, Shelley had believed that since man was by nature good, his corruption was the fault of social, political, and religious institutions and that if these institutions were eliminated or reformed, evil would be overcome.¹⁶⁷ By 1817, he was aware that evil was a part of man himself and that a revolution was not to be effected by altering the forms of society, but by changing the moral character of individual human beings through a regeneration of each human soul.¹⁶⁸ He described this revolution in Prometheus Unbound, his drama of the effort of the individual human soul to free itself from evil within and without. Evil, he thought, was largely the result of spiritual blindness. If man could be made to see the good, the beautiful, and the true, and if he would then undertake, with determination, a spiritual self-reform, the possibilities of his thought and action would be unlimited.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷Grabo, op. cit., p. 413.

¹⁶⁸Ellsworth Barnard, Shelley's Religion, p. 241.

¹⁶⁹Carlos Baker, Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision, p. 6.

Shelley, therefore, took upon himself the task of reforming men by attempting to show them the ideals by which they should live. After the failure of his Ireland project, he realized that direct, immediate action was futile, and he devoted himself to enlightening men through the medium of his poetry. He believed that poetry, by furnishing man with the highest truths and values for contemplation, would determine what man would ultimately become and would lead to man's moral improvement and spiritual regeneration. He stated the aim of his poetry in his preface to Prometheus Unbound: "My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence" (p. 164).

In Prometheus Unbound Shelley showed that the human soul could be ultimately reformed, but he came to realize that, at the present, there were radical imperfections in the world which would not disappear merely because he had conceived of an ideal perfection which men should and could approach. Even his master, Plato, had stated in the Republic that such an ideal was only a standard or norm of judgment which could never be perfectly realized on earth; he had not claimed that, by describing the perfect city, he would be able to bring about such a city in fact. After

Prometheus Unbound, Shelley was no longer convinced that the gap between the world as it is and as it should be could be closed, and he seemed to be aware of the almost superhuman difficulties to be met and to be pessimistic about the likelihood of mankind's actually overcoming them. The Cenci, as he stated in a letter to Hunt, was a picture of the world as it was, rather than as it should be:

Those writings which I have hitherto published have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or may be. The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality. I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colors as my own heart furnishes, that which has been.¹⁷⁰

Following The Cenci, Shelley became concerned with contemporary political affairs, seeing in England and Europe the utter moral deformity of rulers and the widespread ignorance of the masses.¹⁷¹ His experience dispelled his youthful optimism, and he became less and less convinced that he could reform mankind, either by direct or indirect action.¹⁷² He saw a portrait of himself

¹⁷⁰Shelley, op. cit., II, 96.

¹⁷¹Baker, op. cit., p. 156.

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 39.

in the enlightened philosopher in Plato's Republic, who having been taken from the cave and having seen the objects themselves rather than merely their shadows, is persecuted when he returns to the cave and attempts to free the other prisoners so that they, too, may behold the true realities. He had dedicated himself to enlightening others and had sacrificed himself for humanity, but his poetry, by which he was to improve mankind, had been unjustly criticized, and he had been condemned to a life of persecution at the hands of those whom he could have helped. This was the picture of himself which he projected in his letters and poetry from 1819 on.

Shelley had failed his attempt to achieve an ideal for himself or for others. He had tried to bridge the gap between the two worlds which Platonic philosophy had presented him. Plato had stated that the objects of the natural, material world of images could approximate and partake of the ideal and perfect reality of the world of ideas and that man, through his soul, could attain a degree of perfection for which he should continually strive. Shelley, therefore, had sought this perfection for himself by trying to awaken them to a pursuit of it for themselves. His mistake had consisted in his ignoring the limitations imposed by Platonic philosophy. Plato had stated that

pursuit of an ideal should be man's purpose in life, but he had also added that such an ideal could never be attained or wholly realized, because it was not to be found on earth. This was the very conclusion which Shelley had reached as a result of his disillusionment.

Having failed in his pursuit of an ideal, he found, then, a basis for his failure in Platonic philosophy, just as earlier he had found in it a basis for his attempt. He realized that the gap between the world of forms and the world of particulars could be lessened somewhat by man's efforts, but it could never be closed. Earthly objects could attain only to a certain degree of ideal perfect reality. The natural world of particulars could only approximate the real world of forms. There would always be a distinction and a disparity between the two. The earthly world existed in time and space and was thus temporal, mutable, and imperfect. There would, therefore, always be a discord between the mortal image and the eternal form, between the imperfect actuality and the perfect ideal, and reconciliation between the two was impossible. Imperfection and change would be an inevitable accompaniment of the material world, and earthly life would be characterized by limitations. To escape from these limitations and achieve a state of complete perfection, man's

soul must be freed entirely from the restrictions of the body and return to the world of forms. Only in this ideal world, in an unearthly spiritual existence, could perfection be possible.

This, then, was the philosophical position which Shelley accepted from Plato and which he held during the last years of his life. He became aware, through his experiences with men, further substantiated by his knowledge of Platonic philosophy, that men were limited and imperfect and that there was a preponderance of evil in all aspects of human life. He realized that the mass of men was not naturally or innately good, as originally he had believed in his youth when he had been deceived through his affections and his misplaced trust.¹⁷³ He stated this conclusion in 1822 in a letter to Hunt:

My firm persuasion is that the mass of mankind as things are arranged at present, are cruel deceitful & selfish, & always on the watch to surprize those few who are not--& therefore I have taken suspicion to me as a cloak, & scorn as an impenetrable shield.¹⁷⁴

Realizing the state of human existence, he condemned and detested the conditions of life. According to one critic, he voiced " . . . an almost Swiftian revulsion

¹⁷³Grabo, op. cit., p. 187.

¹⁷⁴Shelley, op. cit., II, 382.

against human life."¹⁷⁵ According to another, the description of human existence in his poetry is ". . . one of the most painful to be found in English literature outside of Swift."¹⁷⁶ Once Shelley became convinced that man was not likely to be redeemed and could not reach perfection, he shrank from contact with him and was driven to find happiness elsewhere in an existence apart from others.¹⁷⁷

Seeking, then, an absolute and realizing through experience and the study of Plato that it could not be discovered among men, he desired to withdraw from human society like the Platonic philosopher who had ". . . seen enough of the madness of the multitude."¹⁷⁸ He wished to follow the example of this philosopher, compared to a person that

. . . in the storm of dust and sleet which the driving wind hurries along, retires under the shelter of a wall; and seeing the rest of mankind full of wickedness, he is content, if only he can live his own life and be pure from evil or unrighteousness, and depart in peace and good-will, with bright hopes.

(p. 357)

¹⁷⁵Edward E. Bostetter, The Romantic Ventriloquists, p. 224.

¹⁷⁶Barnard, op. cit., p. 99.

¹⁷⁷M. A. Bald, "Shelley's Mental Progress," Essays and Studies, XIII (1928), 122-3.

¹⁷⁸Plato, The Dialogues of Plato, trans. by B. Jowett, II, 356. All subsequent quotations from Plato are taken from this translation.

He expressed his desire to withdraw from society in 1821 in a letter to his wife:

My greatest content would be utterly to desert all human society . . . [to] shut upon my retreat the floodgates of the world . . . Where two or three are gathered together the devil is among them, and good far more than evil impulses--love far more than hatred--has been to me . . . the source of all sorts of mischief . . . I would be alone & would devote either to oblivion or to future generations the overflowing of a mind which, timely withdrawn from the contagion, should be kept fit for no baser object.¹⁷⁹

His wish to live apart from mankind is further evidenced in Peacock's statement that, had Shelley lived, he would have spent his life

. . . like Volney, looking on the world from his windows without taking part in its turmoils . . . desiring that nothing should be inscribed on his tomb, but his name, the dates of his birth and death, and the single word, Desillusionne.¹⁸⁰

Dissatisfied with an imperfect earthly existence, Shelley came to desire ultimately not simply to desert society, but to withdraw from life entirely. This desire also sprang from his Platonic philosophy. Having a passion for an absolute reality, and believing that this ideal could be attained only in the world of forms, he wanted

¹⁷⁹Shelley, op. cit., II, 339.

¹⁸⁰Quoted in Bostetter, op. cit., p. 240.

above all else to become a part of that Platonic world.¹⁸¹ Death would be the means of entering this world where the soul, freed from physical restrictions, would exist in a pure state. Since he felt that earthly existence was necessarily imperfect and unreal, he placed his hopes in a spiritual existence in which he would be free of worldly evils and limitations. This death wish came to occupy a prominent position in Shelley's thought during the last years of his life. He grew to feel increasingly the transience and the unreal or dream-like quality of the material world and of physical phenomena as opposed to the permanence and reality of an ideal world which he believed existed beyond earthly limitations.¹⁸² His desire for death came from his conviction that beyond life's illusion was a far richer, purer state of being, death being the means of achieving this existence.¹⁸³ He was tired of earthly existence because it seemed to preclude the complete realization of his dreams.¹⁸⁴

Shelley's desire for death and his reasons for such a desire have their basis in Platonic philosophy. Plato's

¹⁸¹Notopoulos, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁸²Neville Rogers, Shelley at Work, p. 171.

¹⁸³Barnard, op. cit., p. 232.

¹⁸⁴Bald, op. cit., p. 131.

philosopher desires to be freed from bodily restrictions so that his soul can reach true knowledge by beholding the essences of the ideal world themselves. Such an idea is expressed in Plato's dialogues, particularly the Phaedrus and the Phaedo. In the former, the philosopher is described as desiring " . . . to fly away, but he cannot; he is like a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below . . ." (III, 156). In the Phaedo, the philosopher desires the separation of the body and the soul possible in death, because he wishes to be free from the dominion of bodily pleasures and senses which obstruct his mental vision; all the evils and impurities of men come from the body, and death separates the philosopher from this corruption.

From Shelley's later letters and conversations, it is apparent that he derived from Plato his wish to achieve a perfect, ideal state through death and his conviction that such an existence was indeed possible. In November, 1820, he wrote to Peacock that Plato and Calderon had been his "gods."¹⁸⁵ In August, 1821, he wrote Medwin, who had expressed his confusion about the nature of an existence after death: "My mind is at peace respecting nothing so

¹⁸⁵Shelley, op. cit., II, 245.

much as the constitution & mysteries of the great system of things--my curiosity on this point never amounts to solicitude."¹⁸⁶ Not long afterward, he stated in a letter to Hogg:

I have employed Greek in large doses, & I consider it the only sure remedy for diseases of the mind. I read the tragedians, Homer, & Plato perpetually; & I have translated the Symposium, the Ion, and part of the Phaedron.¹⁸⁷

Shelley's conviction, derived from Plato, that death is the means to an ideal existence is recorded also by Trelawny.

He writes that Shelley stated:

With regard to the great question, the System of the Universe, I have no curiosity on the subject. I am content to see no farther than Plato and Bacon. My mind is tranquil; I have no fears and some hopes. In our present gross material state our faculties are clouded;-- when Death removes our clay coverings the mystery will be solved.¹⁸⁸

According to Trelawny, Shelley expressed an identical belief at the time of Trelawny's rescuing him from the bottom of a pool into which, unable to swim, Shelley had dived deliberately:

I always find the bottom of the well, and they say Truth lies there. In another minute I should have found it, and you would have found an empty shell. It is an easy way of getting rid of the body . . . It's a great temptation; in another

¹⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 341-2.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 360.

¹⁸⁸Trelawny, op. cit., pp. 52-3.

minute I might have been in another planet . . .
 Death is the veil, which those who live call life:
 they sleep, and it is lifted.¹⁸⁹

A final evidence of Shelley's conviction that after death the human soul will achieve the ideal existence impossible in an earthly life is contained in his letter to the Gisbornes a few months before his death: "Perhaps all discontent with the less (to use a Platonic sophism) supposes the sense of a just claim to the greater" ¹⁹⁰

Shelley's longer poetry written after 1818, particularly from 1821 on, reveals this dissatisfaction with all things connected with earthly life and the same conviction that perfection exists in another world which can be entered through death. In Prometheus Unbound, Adonais, Hellas, and The Triumph of Life, he contrasts the material world, which is temporal, mutable, imperfect, and evil, with the ideal world, which is eternal, immutable, perfect, and good. One he condemns and wishes to flee from; the other, he glorifies and longs to fly to.

In Prometheus Unbound, he pictures the human reformation and regeneration which he believes is ultimately possible, but he does not show that this ideal perfection is possible for man in his present earthly state. Wherever and whenever the consummation is to take place, it is to be

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹⁰Shelley, op. cit., II, 406.

in an atmosphere of another world, and man will emerge triumphant in a far-distant future outside time and space.¹⁹¹ Earthly existence is described with disappointment and discouragement. Evil belongs to the material world alone, and all things in life are subject to fate, time, occasion, chance, and change. Chance, death, and mutability are

The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended heaven,
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

(III.iv.202-4)

The contrast between the temporal world, in which all is unreal, imperfect, and changeable, and the eternal world, in which ideals are fully achieved, constitutes the theme of Adonais. Only through death can man's soul find its true home in a reality which transcends the physical world. Life is a dream, from which Keats has awakened: He has " . . . outsoared the shadow of our night," (XL.1) and he is secure from " . . . the contagion of the world's slow stain" (XL.5). Death, therefore, is to be sought rather than feared, since it provides man the means of escaping earthly limitations and imperfections and of realizing the lasting and complete fulfillment of all that is impossible in life:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows
fly;

¹⁹¹Bald, op. cit., p. 117.

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.--Die,
 If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
 Follow where all is fled

(LII.1-7)

Because Keats has achieved the ideal and perfect reality for which Shelley had been futilely seeking throughout life, the poet, too, longs uncontrollably for death:

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink my Heart?
 Thy hopes are gone before; from all things here
 They are departed; thou shouldst now depart!

'Tis Adonais calls! on, hasten thither,
 No more let Life divide what Death can join
 together.

(LIII.1-3,9)

The theme of dissatisfaction and despair with regard to earthly existence is also expressed in Hellas. The central theme of Hellas, like that of Adonais, concerns the Platonic distinction between the temporal and eternal, between illusion and reality. The earthly world of time and space and all of its elements are an illusion in comparison to the world of eternity and of ultimate reality which is beyond life:

. . . this Whole
 Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and
 flowers,
 With all the silent or tempestuous workings
 By which they have been, are, or cease to be,
 Is but a vision; all that it inherits
 Are notes of a sick eye, bubbles, and dreams;
 Thought is its cradle and its grave, no less
 The future and the past are idle shadows
 Of thought's eternal flight--they have no being.
 (76-84)

The world of physical phenomena is mutable, and history is

cyclical. Although the earthly world is subject always to the changes caused by time, there is a consolation in knowing that this world and all that characterizes it are unreal and impermanent and that another eternal, real, and changing one exists, transcendent of time and space.

Shelley's dissatisfaction with an imperfect earthly existence reaches a climax in his Triumph of Life, left incomplete by his death. His final poem is a sweeping indictment of all that characterizes life in the material world. The theme of The Triumph of Life is the search for and the failure to attain to a Platonic ideal in the earthly world, centering upon the frustration of Rousseau. Rousseau has seen a vision of Ideal Beauty, but once having lost the vision when it is supplanted by an earthly one, he then fails in his search because he is caught up in the triumphal procession of the car of Life, accompanied by the ignorant, the foolish, the deluded, and the evil. Life is described as a corrupting force, a slow stain, a cold, deforming light upon all except the few who, like Christ or Socrates, fled from it. Rousseau laments that, once having seen the bright vision, he has allowed himself to be captured by Life and swept along with the multitude dancing madly around it, because Life has corrupted and deformed him and has made it impossible for him to see again the vision. He urges the narrator to
" . . . forbear / To join the dance, which I had well forborne!"

(188-9) The central doctrine of the poem is that an ideal cannot be found in the earthly world. To succeed in a search for it, one must withdraw so that life's deforming, sullyng influence cannot be felt.

The extreme dissatisfaction with earthly life that is revealed to some extent in the longer poems of Shelley's last years is expressed most completely and intensely in his short despondent lyrics. The tone of these lyrics, like the theme of Prometheus Unbound, Adonais, Hellas, and The Triumph of Life, is explained by Shelley's knowledge of Platonic philosophy. As a result of his experiences and a close study of Plato, Shelley came to believe that the material, physical world of natural phenomena in which man necessarily lived was temporal, changing, unreal, and imperfect. Distinct from this world and in contrast to it existed an ideal but real world which transcended time and space and which was thus eternal and everlasting, permanent and immutable, and perfect. These two worlds were directly opposed to each other, and although the earthly world could approximate in a limited way the ideal world, there would always be a disparity between the two which could never be reconciled. Earthly existence would inevitably be characterized by mutability and imperfection, and only after death, when the human soul was released from physical restrictions and returned to the ideal world from whence it came,

could purity and perfection be possible.

Desiring always the absolute, the ideal and perfect reality, and believing that it was not possible in an earthly world, Shelley was despondent because his existence was necessarily imperfect. His despondency arose from his frustration of being forced to live in a limited physical world which would never be complete and perfect. Thus, he was filled with despair and hopelessness whenever he considered the actual world around him, because he saw its limitations and believed them inevitable. His despondency was further caused by his concept that the perfection and reality, which he knew were impossible on earth and which he desired so intensely, could be achieved elsewhere in another world. Aware of the contrast between the two worlds and recognizing the unalterable defects of the one to which he confined, he was filled with melancholy.

His despondent lyrics, then, express his dissatisfaction with earthly existence which was rooted in his Platonic philosophy. At times he revealed in these poems only his convictions about the world of images or particulars; at other times he contrasted this material world with the world of ideas or forms.

Of the second type of poem are "Lift Not the Painted Veil Which Those Who Live," "Invocation to Misery," "The

Serpent Is Shut out from Paradise," and "An Allegory."

These lyrics express the belief that the earthly world is a shadow, an illusion, or cheap imitation of the ideal world of reality. In "Lift Not the Painted Veil Which Those Who Live," the poet writes that life is characterized by "unreal shapes" and that it mimics ". . . all we would believe." In striving to find love and truth, he had failed. He could approve nothing the world contained, and in his search for realities moved among "the unheeding many" as a ". . . splendor among shadows, a bright blot / Upon this gloomy scene." He had discovered that the ultimate realities which he sought could be discovered, if they existed, only in another world. A similar description of the natural world as being composed of shadows is presented in "An Allegory," in which Shelley states that on the highway of life all must pass a shadowy portal surrounded itself by warring shadows. The unheeding multitude pass by the portal unconscious that a shadowy demon of some sort is following them. The perceptive, inquiring few who notice the gate and stop to examine it learn only that ". . . shadows follow them wher'er they go." A desire to escape from this illusory world into another is expressed in "Invocation to Misery" and "The Serpent Is Shut out from Paradise." In the first, the poet commands Misery to hasten to the bridal bed under the grave, where they will laugh at

"the shadows of the earth" and at the puppet show of the world, since what except " . . . mockery can they mean, / Where I am--where thou hast been?" In the second lyric, the poet writes that although he has been forced to play a part in "life's dull scene," in "the world's carnival," he believes that there is " . . . a place of peace / Where my weak heart and all its throbs will cease."

Although Shelley occasionally contrasted the temporal, changing, imperfect world with the eternal, permanent, perfect one and expressed a desire to escape from one to the other, the despondency in his lyrics is usually caused by his dwelling only upon the limitations of the natural world, particularly upon its mutability. He was profoundly and mournfully conscious of the flux which characterizes earthly experience. Life is all change: both the processes of nature and man's experiences reveal this mutability. Everything earthly passes, decays, or dies.

In his despondent lyrics Shelley often mourns the passing of love. His grief over the idea that love must die or end is expressed in "The Past," "On a Faded Violet," "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast," "Remembrance," and "When the Lamp Is Shattered." In "The Past," the previous happy hours of love are likened to "corpses cold," and in "On a Faded Violet" love is compared to the "shrivelled, lifeless, vacant form" of a dead violet which the poet's

sighs or tears cannot revive. In the last three poems Shelley also bewails the fact that his chosen love has ceased to love him in return. In "When Passion's Trance Is Overpast," his lover's tenderness and truth do not last when passion ends; in "Remembrance," the poet's lover has deserted him, and he is alone in sorrow and bitterness; and in "When the Lamp Is Shattered," he is able to sing nothing but sad dirges, because love has left the loved one's heart, but not his own.

Shelley is concerned not only with the passing of love, but also with the passing of all things. Despondently he contemplates time, death, and mutability. In "Autumn, a Dirge," he is sad because all that is beautiful and beneficial in nature dies with the coming of fall, and he characterizes the year as being cold and dead, the earth as her deathbed. "Dirge for the Year" is a similar mournful expression of Shelley's consciousness of the flow of time in which the year is also described as "death-cold." Shelley's preoccupation with time is revealed again in "Time" and "Time Long Past." In the former poem, time is described as an ocean which, though sick of prey, howls on and vomits its wrecks upon the shore of mortality. In the latter poem, Shelley states that hope and love are a part of the past and laments that time must alter happy conditions, that change must occur. This same despondent emphasis upon mutability, upon the

sad changes brought by time, is expressed in his poems on death and in "Mutability," "If I Walk in Autumn's Even," and "A Lament." Shelley was always painfully aware that earthly experience is necessarily temporal, impermanent, and changing and, therefore, all that is good, or virtuous, or beautiful has a transient, fleeting existence. His 1817 poems on death, "That Time Is Dead Forever, Child" and "Death," express his sorrow that dead loved ones, and the hope and the joy they brought him, are gone forever. The 1820 "Death" states that death, or mutability, ". . . is busy everywhere," that all things which

. . . we love and cherish,
Like ourselves, must fade and perish;
Such is our rude mortal lot.

In "Mutability," he writes that everything ". . . that we wish to stay, / Tempts and then flies" and asserts that virtue is frail, friendship, rare, and love, deceiving. His mutability theme, based upon a belief that the earthly world is temporal, impermanent, and imperfect, continues in "If I Walk in Autumn's Even," in which he realizes ". . . something is not there which was," and the theme reaches a despairing climax in "A Lament," in which he expresses his despondent conviction that the glory of his prime will not return and that since a joy has fled from his life, he will never again be moved by delight.

Shelley's short despondency lyrics written between

1817 and 1822 can be explained, then, on the basis of his mature concept of Platonic philosophy. In his youth, Shelley had embraced the tenets of the optimistic and rationalistic materialism of Godwin and the popular French philosophers. In 1812 his reading of Berkeley and Drummond and his friendship with Peacock inclined him toward a contemplation of the principles of idealism, and in 1817 he began an enthusiastic and serious study of Plato which continued until his death. He found in Plato a philosophy presenting him with two worlds, which he tried to reconcile by seeking to attain for himself and for others in the world of particulars a high degree of the perfection existing in the world of forms. Failing in his pursuit of the ideal because he had disregarded the Platonic limitations of the natural world, with experience he came to accept the distinction and contrast between the actual and the ideal worlds. His despondency arose from this acceptance, because he felt frustrated by his necessarily imperfect earthly existence, characterized by illusion and mutability, and because the despair and hopelessness that accompanied his frustration and dissatisfaction with life were intensified by his belief that in another world, which could be entered through death, existed the ideal, perfect, and permanent reality impossible on earth.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Shelley's short despondency lyrics from 1817 to 1822 were the result of the events of his life and of his philosophy. His experiences and the Platonic philosophy which he accepted seemed to him to support each other, and they combined to convince him that life was imperfect and largely futile and that it could most appropriately be regarded with despair.

His experiences were, for the most part, disappointing. He met with disillusionment and persecution in his relations with others, and he felt powerless to combat the evil he saw in the world. He had been disappointed in Harriet Grove, his sister Elizabeth, Southey, Elizabeth Hitchener, his wife Harriet, Godwin, Emilia Viviani, and even in Mary. He had been persecuted, he felt, in his school days at Syon House Academy and Eton, his expulsion from Oxford, the condemnation following his elopement with Mary, the Chancery suit depriving him of his children, and the criticism and neglect of his works. He had not succeeded in reforming mankind either by direct efforts or indirectly through his writing. In short, he was a failure, both as a man and as a poet, although he believed that his failure was by no means only because of some fault of his own.

In Platonic philosophy, Shelley found a reason for the imperfection of his life and of the world and people around him. A serious study of Plato's dialogues convinced him that earthly existence was necessarily temporal, changing, unreal, and imperfect and that only in another ideal world, which transcended time and space, could eternal, permanent perfection be realized. Earthly life was inevitably limited and unsatisfactory, and only after death, when the human soul could return to the ideal world from whence it came, could perfection be possible.

This Platonic philosophy was substantiated by Shelley's experiences, and the events of his life and his philosophy explain his despondent poems. Believing the natural, physical world in which he lived to be unalterably imperfect and impermanent, he was despondent each time he looked upon it. He felt frustration in being confined to a limited material world, and he felt hopelessness and despair whenever he considered the imperfection of an actual world impossible for him to change. His melancholy was deepened when he contrasted his earthly existence with a spiritual existence in which an ideal and perfect reality could be achieved. The despondency which Shelley felt in his last years, he expressed in his short lyrics.

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