

SHELLEY'S ALASTOR AND THE POETICS OF INFLAMMATORY SHOCK

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Abstract: This article argues that Shelley's *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* dramatizes the fictional Poet's physical decline and death as a psychosomatic response to philosophical overreaching, where the pursuit of Ideal beauty produces a state akin to inflammatory processes and a sustained condition of shock fatigue. I demonstrate how Shelley's depiction of illness is shaped by contemporary medical theories, particularly John Brown's *Elements of Medicine* (1780) and John Hunter's *A Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation, and Gun-shot Wounds* (1794). These works inform Shelley's portrayal of the Poet's flushed but wasting body and his over-excited sensory system, offering a physiological substrate for the poem's metaphysical and erotic tensions. Rather than signalling the Poet's moral or spiritual failure, his decline expresses a complex convergence of somatic and Ideal desires. The "veiled maid" whom he attempts to pursue beyond the grave is both an erotic object and a Neo-Platonic figure of perfected self-knowledge. By aligning erotic longing with the naturally ambiguous semiotics of inflammatory response, subjectivity emerges as an ecologically entangled phenomenon, responsive to both the shocks of material nature and the lure of Ideal forms.

Keywords: *Alastor*, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Hunter, John Brown, inflammation, quest romance, erotic

In this article I examine the physical wastage and eventual death of the "Poet" character in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816) as expressing a curiously erotic form of shock fatigue, in which the perceptual faculties are either stunned or thrown into a kind of overdrive when the Poet character continually fails to achieve spiritual unity with an image of Ideal Beauty,

envisioned in a dream as a "veiled maid" (151).¹ The maid not only represents a transcendental idea of Beauty but a perfected, somatically integrated and self-aware conception of "the poet" where her "mind kindled through all her frame / A permeating fire," instantiating "Knowledge and truth and virtue [...] And lofty hopes of divine liberty" (162-63; 158-59). The "Poet"-protagonist of the poem, according to the "narrator" figure who tells the story of the poet after invoking the "favour" of Nature, mysteriously loses the feeling of the "green earth" and its "love and wonder" in his heart at some point in his wanderings through parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. During these wanderings he experiences acute physical wastage, eventually dying whilst sheltering in the Caucasus mountains. But it is not clear when or why this loss of poetic favour occurs. The speaker of the poem's Preface adds a further layer of ambiguity to the cause of the poet's wastage and death in making hyperbolic claims about him becoming "morally dead" and unable to connect with humankind after attempting to "requisition" all of human "sympathy" to his personal imaginative conceptions.²

Part of my argument here is that, due to the influence of materialist philosophy on Shelley's thought, the poem itself does not in fact represent a loss of connection between the human mind and Nature. It rather depicts a different type of relationship where death itself is considered as both the highest form of organic individuation and a tantalising set of ambiguous physiological signs which Shelley tempts us to interpret as Neo-Platonic "shadowy lure" and "strange charms" that enable a glimpse of Ideal forms waiting beyond the grave (294-95). These moments, and many others, also have Wordsworthian resonances, which show the Poet "trailing clouds of glory" in our visible reality that intimate the presence of the transcendental "worlds not realised" invoked in Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode."³

Alastor is a complex engagement with Wordsworth's idea that, even in such high spiritual ambitions, the poet must be in touch with both instinctual "animal sensations" and "the causes that excite these."⁴ In making this interpretation I build upon an aspect of Martyn Crucefix's seminal reading which casts *Alastor* as

¹ "Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude," in *The Poems of Shelley, Vol. 1*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (Harlow: Longman, 1989), 458-89. All quotations are from this edition. Line numbers are in parentheses in the text.

² Preface to *Alastor*, in *The Poems of Shelley*, 1:462-63.

³ William Wordsworth, "Ode [Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood]" (lines 64, 145), in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 273, 276.

⁴ William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1800," in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 108.

a critique of Wordsworth's "superstition," defined as a state where people become "alienated from a vital part of themselves" in desiring a foretaste of the next world.⁵ But my reading is even more in accordance with Michael O'Neill's explanation of Shelley's engagement with Wordsworth, which suggests that "the poem shimmers between perspectives," so that *Alastor's* "involvement with Wordsworthian poetry is simultaneously an act of homage and a form of critique."⁶ My account develops a new angle on the idea that *Alastor* makes an uneasy reconciliation with Wordsworth in suggesting that the poet's illness, which is at first a kind of self-alienation, ultimately embodies a complex shimmering between perspectives which both critique and absorb the high spiritual ambitions of the Wordsworthian poet.

Inflammatory symptoms are given a double-edged capacity for both healing and wasting, both of which, I shall demonstrate, are charged with eroticism. The nature of this poem's eroticism is an important question, and my reading argues that rather than representing narcissistic onanism, the episode of the veiled maid exemplifies self-pleasure as something instinctive and natural.⁷ *Alastor* demonstrates how deeply material, and erotic, Wordsworth's "animal sensations" inspired by Nature can be, without entirely departing from his notion that death returns the poet to his transcendental home. For Shelley, however, death is more of a material continuum than a spiritual change of state. Andrew Lacey has argued that in *Alastor* Shelley moves from the Idealist conception of the soul surviving the body to be found in *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* to a more sceptical philosophical position on the afterlife, amounting to a "new poetic and intellectual paradigm."⁸ I argue here that in *Alastor*, this scepticism, influenced by philosophical materialism, takes the form of an interest in the operations of underlying bodily processes which affect health and disease.

⁵ Martyn Crucefix, "Wordsworth, Superstition, and Shelley's *Alastor*," *Essays in Criticism* 33, no. 2 (1983): 126-47.

⁶ Michael O'Neill, "'A kind of an excuse:' Shelley and Wordsworth Revisited," in *Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900: Essays in Honour of Vincent Newey*, ed. Ashley Chanter, Michael Davies and Philip Shaw (Farnham: Ashgate, 2001), 37.

⁷ Hogle's comment that the veiled maid represents an "onanistic desire for oneness with himself" is indicative of how this poem is usually interpreted, but the caveat is needed that, despite the attitude of the Preface, analysis of the poem does not support the idea that this has negative connotations. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 53.

⁸ Andrew Lacey, *Shelley's Visions of Death* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 55.

Inflammation and Eroticism

My reading is original in drawing attention to the way in which philosophical themes and medical understandings of physiology are interwoven in *Alastor*, bespeaking Shelley's interest in the metaphysics of illness. I read the Poet's sufferings through two medical treatises which may have influenced Shelley's thinking on natural philosophy: John Brown's *Elements of Medicine* (1780) and John Hunter's *A Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation and Gun-shot Wounds* (1794). Though there is no direct evidence that Shelley read Brown's works, he did study Thomas Trotter's Brunonian-influenced writings (Trotter was a disciple of Brown and wrote significant texts on alcohol and nervous disorders), as we can see from one of Shelley's notes to *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813), which reads, "See Trotter on the Nervous Temperament."⁹ Sharon Ruston has also argued there is strong documentary evidence that Shelley moved in the St Bartholomew's medical teaching milieu (especially during 1811) where Hunter's views were taught and debated by Abernethy and Lawrence.¹⁰ An analysis of *Alastor* which brings together the influences of Hunter and Brown enables us to answer the question of how, as the Preface to *Alastor* has it, the creative "imagination" can be simultaneously "inflamed and purified."¹¹ The depiction of the Poet's illness, with his flushed yet withered cheeks, shares Hunter's interest in vascular dilations and contractions of the tissues and skin in response to irritants and shocks of various kinds. Shelley combines Hunter's original hypothesis that inflammatory responses arising from the shock of bodily wounds may be part of protective healing processes as well as a sign of impending death with Brown's notion that the body can be continually in an injurious state of over-"excitation" which fatigues and wears the tissues and nerves.

This combination of ideas enables us to read the poet's illness as a psychosomatic expression of the Neo-Platonic desire to reach an understanding of a higher "good," even if the price of this is to die.¹² Mary Shelley's "Note to *Alastor*" in her 1839 edition claims that Shelley actually believed he was dying at the time of the poem's composition (late 1815), emphasising that the poem's "ideal hues" stem

⁹ *The Poems of Shelley*, 1:420.

¹⁰ Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 80. Also see Ruston for Shelley's indebtedness to the vitality debate. I agree that Shelley comes down on the materialist side, though Hunter is a little-acknowledged influence on both sides of the question of whether there is an "immaterial" force added to matter to produce organic "life."

¹¹ Preface to *Alastor*, 462.

¹² Plotinus, *Translations from the Greek of the following Treatises of Plotinus: viz. On Suicide*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: Printed for the Translator, 1834), 88.

from, and were shaped and “softened” by, a “recent anticipation of death.”¹³ This goes some way towards explaining the Poet’s slow surrender to a death promising apprehension of Ideal forms. But, as we shall see, in *Alastor* Shelley’s interest lies more in the contingent and complex erotic potential of the shock given to the mind and body through inflammatory illness, rather than solely in the desire to ascend from appreciation of carnal pleasures into a higher state.

This can be seen in the Poet’s response to the veiled maid. After realising that she was only a dream vision, he sets off to find “strange truths in undiscovered lands” but continually finds reality cold, benighted and so shocking to his frame that he begins to waste away from the very effort of desiring Ideal forms so much that he deliberately seeks out death, crying “Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!” (77, 368-69). His sense of reality is “cold” and “vacant” but curiously “rousing:” “Roused by the shock he started from his trance” (192). Into this bleak vision the narrator, focalising the Poet’s thoughts, interjects the question, “Whither have fled / The hues of heaven that canopied his bower / Of yesternight?” (196-98). The answer is that the “path” of the “departure” of these Ideal hues comes with an erotic vision of somatic self-knowledge exemplified by the maid, where body and mind are thoroughly inter-fused and ontologically self-sufficient (this is Shelley’s model of how a poet should be), so that the Poet perceives, though the “warm light of their own life / Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil” (175-76). The subtle irony is that the method of the Poet’s departure from life mimics this somatic self-sufficiency in an experience of illness and death which is so completely entangled with the material operations of the natural world that he does not seem to be a separate entity from them (“Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed / The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there / At peace, and faintly smiling;” 643-45). At the moment of the Poet’s death, “the minutest ray / Was quenched, the pulse yet lingered in his heart. / It paused – it fluttered” (657-59). Here we can see Shelley leaning into materialism, as for a moment the pulse defiantly survives the quenching of the light, often associated with spirit, asserting its affinity with the mortal side of nature’s “ebb and flow” (653) whilst also claiming a transcendental impetus for the fluttering of the individual heart. In *Alastor*, we see subjectivity conceived as an ecological and psychosomatic topology which, as Robert Mitchell has put it, allowed Romantic thinkers to see biological “life” as a “new form of linkage between elements of the open system of the world.”¹⁴

¹³ *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary Shelley, 4 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1839), 1:142.

¹⁴ Robert Mitchell, “Regulating Life: Romanticism, Science, and the Liberal Imagination,” *European Romantic Review* 29, no. 3 (2018): 282.

The Poet's illness is as spiritually sustaining as it is deleterious to the body:

wildly he wandered on,
Day after day a weary waste of hours,
Bearing within his life the brooding care
That ever fed on its decaying flame.
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering
Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand
Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone
As in a furnace burning secretly
From his dark eyes alone.

(244-54)

[...] Not the strong impulse hid
In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame
Had yet performed its ministry: it hung
Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud
Glams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods
Of night close over it.

(415-20)

Somehow, "brooding care" (246) has a "lustre" (252) despite being a consumer of "life" (252) and is part of a secret "burning" (253) which drives on the Poet as well as makes him weak with the continual shock of being rebuffed in his attempts to reach the maid once more through sleep or death. The doubled-edged nature of the Poet's illness is also to be seen in his flushed and feverous cheeks which flicker between signalling closeness to death and youthful sexual arousal, as the veiled maid is a "dream of hopes that never yet / Had flushed his cheek" (150-51).

Before we examine how Hunter's and Brown's ideas can help us interpret the Poet's illness, we need to understand the associations between inflammation and sexual desire formed in the Romantic period. "Inflammation" had a euphemistic quality, and was perceived to both affect and connect the tissues and the imagination through the operations of the nervous system. As Richard C. Sha has argued, this incipient medical paradigm had implications for perceived connections between subjectivity and erotic pleasure.¹⁵ Many of the uses of the word "inflammation"

¹⁵ Richard C. Sha, "Only Connect: Romantic Nerves, Pleasure, Aesthetics and Sexuality," in *Literature and Medicine: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. Clark Lawlor and Andrew Mangham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 161-85.

arise in didactic writing on the problems young people face in managing their sexual desires, as we can see from this remark from the medical writer Thomas Beddoes, which connects both sexual habits and imaginative acts to illusory physical and mental pleasure: young people “seek to inflame passion or as material for voluptuous waking dreams when they lack the opportunity or power for more active indulgences [...]. They have found out the worst. They have learned the road to licentious pleasures,” by which is meant an excessive interest in masturbation.¹⁶ Though there is no immediate indication in the Preface to *Alastor* that the context is erotic, it does stress the poet’s youth, which is consistent with the contemporary anti-masturbation literature’s obsession with the forms of licentiousness which most preoccupy young minds.

But there is also a historical connection between materialism and eroticism upon which Shelley draws in *Alastor*, which was more sympathetic to uninhibited sexual expression. Paul Hamilton explains how the reception of eighteenth-century French materialist philosophy, particularly that of Baron d’Holbach, was cast as both philosophically reductive and, in consequence, overtly sexual in its emphasis on the nature of anatomy due to its challenges to religion and conventional morality:

his scientism seems for almost all his readers to be charged by what it might not necessarily be expected to possess – passion, resistance, eroticism and wit. He can, that is, be read as dealing with the shock to the readers whom he forces to confront a nature thought obscene when stripped of its ideological overlay.¹⁷

Sexualized somatic response has a similar shock value in *Alastor*, with the overwrought poetic register of the episode of the veiled maid jarring with the simpler, more Wordsworthian “natural piety” of the opening section.¹⁸ The shock of materiality as a shorthand for erotic experience, and *vice versa*, also gently

¹⁶ Thomas Beddoes, *Hygeia: or Essays Moral and Medical: On the Causes Affecting the Personal State of Our Middling and Affluent Classes, Vol. 1* (London: R. Phillips. 1802), 70.

¹⁷ Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 141.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, “Ode” (line 3), 271. In David Duff’s words, there is a “smooth mix” of genres in *Alastor*, encompassing the romance, the Gothic, the elegy and the Faustian drama, but there is also a “rough mix” of poetic registers here which performs the difficulty of reading our own bodies and instincts when under the influence of societal customs. See David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

satirizes the Neo-Platonic idea of seeking for a higher and inaccessible Beauty which must nevertheless be initially perceived in startlingly material terms before the mind is able to ascend beyond the immediate objects of the sense.

Hunter's and Brown's Physiological Models

Another important influence on *Alastor* is the way in which the tradition of medieval literary romance often conceived of overweening sexual desire as resembling a wound in the body, which will not heal without possession of the beloved, or of the self-knowledge which he or she symbolizes. I want to add to the complex web of influence which structures this poem the idea that the depictions of illness and death also bear resemblance to the literal gunshot wounds described by Hunter in his treatise of 1794, where he speaks of medical discoveries made on the battlefields of Europe, particularly during the Seven Years War. Considering the thinking in this treatise alongside Brown's *Elements of Medicine* provides an insight into the ways in which Shelley's thought engaged with contemporary debates in the natural sciences about the limits of organic "life." Hunter describes the realization that gunshot wounds healed differently from other injuries – not because of poisoning, as previously thought, but because bullets often caused deep tissue damage without immediate external bleeding, leading to necrosis and secondary infection. To understand this indirect causality, Hunter theorized a four-stage model of inflammation conceived as a largely adaptive process rather than a straightforward pathology. His work on adhesive inflammation (the first stage of wound healing) showed that the body naturally sealed injuries by producing fibrin, reducing the need for harsh cauterization. Addressing curious swellings in the body related to gunshot sounds, Hunter thus writes:

there must be other attending circumstances to determine it to be the very first action of the vessels in inflammation, for as that appearance may either belong to a briskness in the circulation in the part at the time, or the very first step in inflammation, their causes are to be discriminated by some other symptom; they are both a kind of blush, or an exertion of the action of the vessels; but when it is an effect of an inflammatory cause, it is then only that the inflammation has not yet produced any change in the natural structure of the parts, but which it will soon do. What the action is, or in what it differs from the common action of the vessels, is not easily ascertained, since we are more able to judge of the effects than the immediate cause.¹⁹

¹⁹ John Hunter, *A Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation, and Gun-shot Wounds* (London: George Nicol, 1794), 281.

Strikingly, the blush is an ambiguous marker of complex causal mechanisms involved in injury, infection and anaphylactic shock – making it just as likely to indicate a slow healing process or an indirect expression of underlying tissue damage than the direct site of infection or necrosis. Such topologically deferred response would be likely to be read today as an expression of the immune system remembering previous sites of infection and cellular disruption. In *Alastor*, the flushed cheeks of the Poet are interpretively ambiguous in just this way, with the additional connotation of amorous feelings, which foreshadows death itself and the erotic experience the Poet yearns to find in a death where something of the individual soul may survive. The biosemiosis of inflammation is naturally equivocal, even self-“mocking” (295) in obfuscating attempts to interpret involuntary bodily expression and anticipate death as an affective and philosophical experience.

Alastor is also distinctly indebted to the “Brunonian” physiological model, which held that all diseases were caused by over- or under-stimulation of the tissues, nerves and mind, so that all conscious life itself has an “excitability” as its operative mode. Neil Vickers explains that the “the exciting powers do their work by expending excitability” and Richard C. Sha proposes that for Brown, “life was always on the verge of exhaustion and therefore had to be actively conserved and measured.”²⁰ Brown describes the body’s liability to become internally imbalanced, even within one overarching mood of over-stimulation:

Instances of the greater excitement of a part than of the rest of the body, are afforded by the earlier sweating of the brow of an healthy person, when he is using exercise; by checked perspiration; by inflammation, or some analogous affection in general diseases [...]. The whole body must partake in the morbid change; it must be one common affection pervading the whole.²¹

“Inflammation” here carries implicit connotations of over-exerted erotic imaginings which might be responsible for a “morbid change.” Combining Brunonian exhaustion with Hunter’s equivocally communicative inflammatory processes may help us understand how the Poet’s “brooding care” can be burning deep within in the body, just beyond the realms of control, in a way which is fatally shocking and curiously sustaining. Inflammation, then, is double-edged: potentially both a rousing healing process and a sign of a future grave “change”

²⁰ Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 6; Sha, “Only Connect,” 167.

²¹ John Brown, *The Elements of Medicine* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 41, 39-40 n.

in the body, as both Hunter and Brown put it. In one way of reading Hunter, there is as much semiotic and interpretive instability present as there is complex physiology. But Brown's notion of "excitability" suggests both that physiological processes themselves can produce emotionally mixed moods, and that inflammation and its accompanying fatigue can have an enervating aspect as they work through various degrees and modes of excitation, the highest points of which have a sexual element. Thus, *Alastor's* inflammatory markers suggest the rousing nature of healing processes as well as the drama of fluctuating modes of Brunonian stimulation which equivocate between deathly and re-vitalizing states. Both are potentially erotic: the poet can conceive of healthy eroticism as a kind of nervous over-excitability, where the skin leads the way before the rest of the body (and the imagination) responds, as well as conceive of death itself as a gateway to the erotic bliss of merging with the Ideal form of beauty presaged by the veiled maid. Seen from a materialist perspective, healing and dying can come paradoxically close together, which is why the Poet is ultimately not one of the "morally dead" indited by the Preface, as even death without an afterlife can be a form of Being which opens us to transfiguration by forces beyond our individual mind and body.

We can now begin to see how the imagination might be able to become both "inflamed and purified" if we recognize the poet's flushed cheeks and wasted limbs as part of a protective biological process driven by an excessive response to the urgings of the erotic imagination. The Poet's early converse with the majestic forms of Nature (which is the context of this passage from the Preface) is transformed during the poem into a heightened self-knowledge based on instincts determined by secret material and physiological laws ("As in a furnace burning secretly / From his dark eyes alone;" 253-54). This, for Shelley, is a form of purification which acknowledges both death and erotic experiences as natural, ecological processes. But the theoretical possibility of this purifying instinct must be inferred by the reader through diagnosing the ways in which the Poet fails to achieve this, as the poet is initially guilty of screening knowledge of his illness from his conscious mind up until the end of the poem where his cognitive processes align and "the influxes of sense [...] calmly fe[e]d / The stream of thought" (641-44). Though in one sense, death is the object of his quest – "Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!" – he is also, until this point near the end of the poem, "forgetful of the grave" (368-69, 520):

Beside the grassy shore
Of the small stream he went; he did impress
On the green moss his tremulous step, that caught

Strong shuddering from his burning limbs. As one
Roused by some joyous madness from the couch
Of fever, he did move; yet not like him,
Forgetful of the grave, where, when the flame
Of his frail exultation shall be spent,
He must descend. With rapid steps he went
Beneath the shade of trees, beside the flow
Of the wild babbling rivulet; and now
The forest's solemn canopies were changed
For the uniform and lightsome evening sky.

(514-26)

The joyous madness with which the poet impresses the moss bespeaks a Brunonian ecstasy affirming Life itself as physiological sensation, which reaches its highest point of excitation in an inflammatory peak. The moss catches an erotic shudder from limbs inflamed by illness, "shuddering limbs" (182) having also been part of the Poet's "excess / Of love" for the veiled maid (181-82). The poem's narrative curve, which follows the Poet from bower to bower until the final moments of his death, makes a gently corrective vindication of Wordsworth. The Poet is, implicitly, "forgetful of the grave" up until this penultimate moment of rest, when he becomes more consciously aware of his physical condition. This change distinguishes the Preface's notion of the "morally dead" who are "duped by no generous error" from those capable of conceiving of the erotic pleasures associated with materialist philosophy as generous errors not totally incompatible with Idealism.²² The body's equivocal biosemiotic intelligence, demonstrated through polysemic flushes, provides a somatic correlate for the Poet's Ideal erotic longings which indiscriminately strive to discern the presence of transcendental forms through the veil of mortal perception. These somatic correlates extend beyond the confines of the Poet's body:

And to the damp leaves and blue cavern mould,
Nurses of rainbow flowers and branching moss,
Commit the colours of that varying cheek,
That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

(598-601)

The Poet's inflammatory response transferring onto or being cognitively distributed in the moss, leaves and mould, demonstrates a unity between human

²² Preface to *Alastor*, 462-63.

and plant life such that the Poet's subjectivity is not entirely confined to the inside of his body. Such enmeshment suggests that it is not possible to truly spurn the "choicest gifts" of Nature (204-205), as the poem's narrator curiously suggests.

Shelley is thinking in terms which greatly expand the notion of subjectivity by conceiving of it as extended into wider ecological systems. In this he goes against the Idealist philosophical habits of his time and creates a distinctive form of speculative, yet sceptical materialism. Ultimately, what seem to be a series of shocks resulting from the *failure* to actuate the procedures of Neo-Platonic love where one moves from appreciation of sensory objects to an understanding of Beauty itself, are in fact an actuating of such gestures which, paradoxically, do not require belief in an afterlife, only a confidence in death being an aspect of the flux of material processes. Shelley's erotic inflammation, in the insistence on ecological connection between animal and vegetable life, side-steps the linear nature of using experiences of earthly felicity to step incrementally towards transcendental knowledge in the manner described by Plotinus, who describes philosophical love as "a ladder, enabling us to ascend into the region of beauty, and survey its immeasurable extent."²³ Yet though the Poet eroticizes the deathly shocks of inflammatory response which provide a more contingent way of mapping subjectivity through interoceptive connection with the natural world, the stylistic and conceptual contradictions of *Alastor* give the reader a chance at *not* finding post-dualistic views of health, as well as death itself, shocking.

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²³ Plotinus, *Concerning the Beautiful: Or, a Paraphrased Translation from the Greek of Plotinus, Ennead I, Book VI*, trans. Thomas Taylor (1787) (London: John M. Watkins, 1917), 4.

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