

For the Negro-ship, whose freight
Is the theme of their debate,
15 Wrinkling their red gills the while—

Are ye—two vultures sick for battle,
Two scorpions under one wet stone,
Two bloodless wolves whose dry throats rattle,
20 Two crows perched on the murrained² cattle,
Two vipers tangled into one.

1819

1832

To William Shelley¹

I

My lost William, thou in whom
Some bright spirit lived, and did
That decaying robe consume
Which its lustre faintly hid,—
5 Here its ashes find a tomb,
But beneath this pyramid²
Thou art not—if a thing divine
Like thee can die, thy funeral shrine
Is thy mother's grief and mine.

2

10 Where art thou, my gentle child?
Let me think thy spirit feeds,
With its life intense and mild,
The love of living leaves and weeds
Among these tombs and ruins wild;—
15 Let me think that through low seeds
Of sweet flowers and sunny grass
Into their hues and scents may pass
A portion—

1819

1824

Ode to the West Wind¹

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

2. A *murrain* is a malignant disease of domestic animals.

1. The Shelleys' son William, who died of malaria in June 1819, age three and a half years, was buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. These unfinished lines were discovered among the poet's papers by his widow, Mary Shelley (the grieving mother of line 9), who published them in her husband's *Posthumous Poems* (1824).

2. The Shelleys, who left Rome shortly after William's death, ordered the construction of a small stone pyramid to mark his grave. This is not, except perhaps obliquely, a reference to the famous tomb, a 150-foot pyramid, of the 1st-century B.C.E. Roman magistrate Caius Cestius just outside the cemetery.

1. This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on

5 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic² red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring³ shall blow

10 Her clarion⁴ o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver;⁵ hear, O hear!

2

15 Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like Earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,

Angels⁶ of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,
20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head

Of some fierce Mænad,⁷ even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou Dirge

25 Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might

Of vapours,⁸ from whose solid atmosphere clouds
Black rain and fire and hail will burst: O hear!

3

30 Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his chrystalline streams,⁸

a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains [Shelley's note]. As in other major Romantic poems—for example, the opening of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and the conclusion to Shelley's *Adonais*—the rising wind, linked with the cycle of the seasons, is presented as the correspondent in the external world to an inner change, a burst of creative power that is paralleled to the inspiration of prophets. In many languages the words for *wind*, *breath*, *soul*, and *inspiration* are identical or related. Thus Shelley's west wind is a "spirit" (the Latin *spiritus*: wind, breath, soul, and the root word for *inspiration*), the "breath of Autumn's being," which on earth, sky, and sea destroys in autumn to revive in the spring. In some philosophical histories of the period, the spirit of liberty was said to have deserted Europe for the Americas. In blowing from the west, the wind may carry liberty back again.

Shelley's sonnet-length stanza, developed from the interlaced three-line units of the Italian *terza rima* (*aba bcb cdc*, etc.), consists of a set of four such tercets, closed by a couplet rhyming with the middle line of the preceding tercet: *aba bcb cdc ded ee*.

2. Referring to the kind of fever that occurs in tuberculosis.

3. The west wind that will blow in the spring.

4. A high, shrill trumpet.

5. Refers to the Hindu gods Siva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Preserver.

6. In the old sense of messengers.

7. A female worshipper who danced frenziedly in the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus), the Greek god of wine and vegetation. As vegetation god he was fabled to die in the fall and to be resurrected in the spring.

8. The currents that flow in the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes with a visible difference in color.

Beside a pumice isle in Baiæ's bay,⁹
 And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
 Quivering within the wave's intenser day,

35 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
 For whose path the Atlantic's level powers

Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
 The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
 40 The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,
 And tremble and despoil themselves: ¹ O hear!

4

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
 45 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

The impulse of thy strength, only less free
 Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even
 I were as in my boyhood, and could be

50 The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
 Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need,
 Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
 I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

55 A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
 One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

5

Make me thy lyre,² even as the forest is:
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
 60 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
 Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!³
 65 And, by the incantation of this verse,

9. West of Naples, the locale of imposing villas built in the glory days of imperial Rome. Their ruins are reflected in the waters of the bay, a sight Mary Shelley also describes in the Introduction to *The Last Man* (see p. 957).

1. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea . . . sympathizes with that of the land in the change of

seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it [Shelley's note].

2. The Eolian lyre, which responds to the wind with rising and falling musical chords.

3. This line may play on the secondary sense of "leaves" as pages in a book.

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
70 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

1819

1820

Prometheus Unbound Shelley composed this work in Italy between the autumn of 1818 and the close of 1819 and published it the following summer. Upon its completion he wrote in a letter, "It is a drama, with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted; and I think the execution is better than any of my former attempts." It is based on the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, which dramatizes the sufferings of Prometheus, unrepentant champion of humanity, who, because he had stolen fire from heaven, was condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Caucasus and to be tortured by a vulture feeding on his liver; in a lost sequel Aeschylus reconciled Prometheus with his oppressor. Shelley continued Aeschylus's story but transformed it into a symbolic drama about the origin of evil and the possibility of overcoming it. In such early writings as *Queen Mab*, Shelley had expressed his belief that injustice and suffering could be eliminated by an external revolution that would wipe out or radically reform the causes of evil, attributed to existing social, political, and religious institutions. Implicit in *Prometheus Unbound*, on the other hand, is the view that both evil and the possibility of reform are the moral responsibility of men and women. Social chaos and wars are a gigantic projection of human moral disorder and inner division and conflict; tyrants are the outer representatives of the tyranny of our baser over our better elements; hatred for others is a product of self-contempt; and external political reform is impossible unless we have first reformed our own nature at its roots, by substituting selfless love for divisive hatred. Shelley thus incorporates into his secular myth—of universal regeneration by a triumph of humanity's moral imagination—the ethical teaching of Christ on the Mount, together with the classical morality represented in the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus.

FROM PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts

Audisne hæc Amphiaræ, sub terram abdite?¹

Preface

The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbi-

1. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2,60: "Do you hear this, O Amphiaraus, concealed under the earth?" In Greek myth Amphiaraus was a seer. Fleeing from an unsuccessful assault on Thebes, he was saved from his pursuers by Zeus, who by a thunderbolt opened a cleft in the earth that swallowed him up.

In his *Disputations* Cicero is arguing for the Stoic doctrine of the need to master pain and suf-

fering. He quotes this line (a Latin translation from Aeschylus's lost drama *Epigoni*) in the course of an anecdote about Dionysius of Heraclea, who, tormented by kidney stones, abjures the doctrine of his Stoic teacher Zeno that pain is not an evil. By way of reproof his fellow-Stoic Cleanthes strikes his foot on the ground and utters this line. Cicero interprets it as an appeal to Zeno the Stoic master (under the name of Amphiaraus).