Byron's Manfred and Shelley's Alastor: Narcissism and the Search for an Ideal

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by

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Section I: Narcissism

To state that writers are often obsessed with themselves is certainly not a novel idea. Writers often, either consciously or unconsciously, infuse elements of their personality into their literary creations. Sometimes this self-reflection assumes the form of autobiography, yet it can also be the vehicle for an exploration of the psychological complexities or philosophical musings of the author. Wordsworth, for example, employs the former in *The Prelude* and the latter in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*. While these categories are not mutually exclusive, for there are elements of each that permeate both works, it is not farfetched to state that Wordsworth is looking differently at himself through each poetic manifestation.

However, stating that authors write about themselves or about the things they know is markedly different than discerning from a literary creation that an author suffers from a psychological condition. To do that, one would have to assume that a character is an identical representation of a writer. Even the most painstakingly accurate autobiographical work has an element of fiction or fabrication. Writers might indeed create protagonists that resemble them, but the creative process is never purely mimetic, for it is certainly adulterated and altered by the imagination. Therefore, it seems presumptuous to diagnose a writer through a literary work and from that arrive at some definitive understanding of his personality. Yet, at the same time, it also seems equally presumptuous to categorically deny that a reader can discern aspects of an author’s personality from a particular text. There needs to be a degree of objectivity by which one recognizes the author and creation as separate but also as intimately attached through the creative process.
A psychoanalytic interpretation of a work hopes to arrive at a certain understanding of both author and creation that respects the autonomy of each while simultaneously recognizing their commonalities. To analyze the motivations of a character through his words, thoughts and actions is not only to better understand the work itself but also the creator. Writing on the subject of psychological interpretations of literature, Barbara A. Shapiro states its importance in understanding a given text:

Current psychodynamic theories thus describe a deep level of intense, primitive, internalized object relationships. This is useful material for the literary critic, since a work of art, to a large extent, is the manifestation of the emotional dynamics and conflicts of the artist's internal world. Obviously, though, a work of art is more than its psychological roots, and although involvement in emotional conflict may facilitate or bring about creative activity, that activity must ultimately become autonomous and detached from the original conflict, if the artist is to be successful. (10)

By looking at the protagonist as if one were analyzing a living being, the reader hopes to gain added insight that might facilitate a more in-depth appreciation of both character and work. This not only requires knowledge of psychology but also the ability to close-read a text.

This study will focus on two narrative poems that provide ample opportunity for just such an analysis. Byron's *Manfred* and Shelley's *Alastor* both feature a similar protagonist, who embarks on a journey for not only knowledge but also for
the acquisition of an idealized female figure. The solitary adventurer in search of enriching life experiences was a common literary motif in the English Romantic Period, as it was employed quite often not only by Byron and Shelley but also Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. Considering the fact that the Romantics valued the individual, especially his independence and autonomy, this literary model suited their intentions perfectly.

Our protagonists, Manfred and The Poet in Alastor, are both victims of severe narcissism that disallows them any satisfaction on this earth. Before analyzing the texts themselves, it might prove efficacious to trace the history of the Narcissus myth and show how it was later employed by Freud in the creation of his theory of narcissism. This will provide the framework for a psychoanalytic reading of the poems.

From Greek legend comes the story of Narcissus, a lovely youth who falls in love with his own reflection and eventually dies because he cannot possess it. There are three primary myths that deal with the subject, but one, namely Ovid's, is considered paramount for Freud's theory of narcissism, which provides the psychological framework for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the literary texts.

Narcissus comes from Thespiae in the area of Boeotia. The oldest version of the myth comes from Volume LXIX of the Oxyrhynchus papyri. W.B. Henry, the editor of the papyri, conjectures that the fragment might have been part of the Metamorphoses by Parthenius of Nicaea, who was captured and brought to Rome in 73 BC. The fragments were found in the 19th century, yet they were only recently translated for publication in 2004. Below is the English translation:
... god-like ...  
... ...

He had a cruel heart, and hated all of them,

Till he conceived a love for his own form:

He wailed, seeing his face, delightful as a dream,

Within a spring; he wept for his beauty.

Then the boy shed his blood and gives it to the earth

... to bear (7–14)

In the above fragment, Narcissus rejects all his suitors before failing in love with his own image. Depressed because of his inability to possess his reflection, he kills himself next to the water.

The story as it appears in the Oxyrhynchus papyri is quite similar to Pausanias’ version, where a young man named Ameinias falls in love with Narcissus and kills himself with Narcissus’ sword. Before his death, Ameinias pleads to the god Nemesis that Narcissus be afflicted with unrequited love, which he later experiences when he falls in love with his image. Distraught, Narcissus commits suicide.

Ovid’s version is printed in his own Metamorphoses, appearing some 150 years after Pausanias and roughly 50 years following the Oxyrhynchus papyri. Considering the fact that Ovid’s telling was appropriated by Freud, it is the most widely known of the three accounts. It differs from the other two in that the nymph Echo falls in love with Narcissus, but she is completely rejected by him, which leads to her disintegrating into a whisper:
But still, though spurned, her love remains and grows on grief; her sleepless cares waste away her wretched form; she becomes gaunt and wrinkled and all moisture fades from her body into the air. Only her voice and her bones remain: then, only voice; for they say that her bones were turned to stone. She hides in woods and is seen no more upon the mountain-sides; but all may hear her, for voice, and voice alone, still lives in her. (153)

Although Echo is portrayed as suffering the most at the hands of Narcissus, it is not she but a scorned youth who implores the gods for Narcissus to suffer the similar fate of unrequited love.

Similar to the Narcissus who appears in Pausanias and the Oxyrhynchus papyri, Ovid’s Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in a spring:

Here the youth, worn by the chase and the heat, lies down, attracted thither by the appearance of the place and by the spring. While he seeks to slake his thirst another thirst springs up, and while he drinks he is smitten by the sight of the beautiful form he sees. He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow. (154)

Terms such as “unsubstantial hope” and “shadow” are important in the context of my analysis in that both Byron and Shelley, when describing their amorous longings, use similar terms.

Even within the telling of the myth, Ovid’s narrator pleads with Narcissus to break away from the image:
O fondly foolish boy, why vainly seek to clasp a fleeting image? What you seek is nowhere; but turn yourself away, and the object of your love will be no more. That which you behold is but the shadow of a reflected form and has no substance of its own. With you it comes, with you it stays, and it will go with you—if you can go. (156)

Ovid clearly recognizes that Narcissus is suffering from self-infatuation, which obviously, when taken to an extreme, is deleterious to one’s health. When an individual is in such a state, it is virtually impossible to ameliorate his narcosis, a Greek word that interestingly derives from “narke,” meaning “numb.”

Narcissus continues to suffer even after he realizes that he himself is the image in the water. At this point, he pines for death:

Oh, I am he! I have felt it, I know now my own image. I burn with love of my own self; I both kindle the flames and suffer them. What shall I do?...Oh, that I might be parted from my own body!...Death is nothing to me, for in death I shall leave my troubles; I would he that is loved might live longer; but as it is, we two shall die together in one breath. (157)

Even though Narcissus has gained a modicum of self-realization, his response is not one that will render him psychologically healthy, for his only remedy is to die. His “troubles” are produced by his self-longing, yet he is unable to break away from the obsession that leads to his self-destruction.

He loses his “strength and vigour, and all that lately was so pleasing to behold.” Self-love has ironically rendered him less lovely than before, at least in a
physical sense. Echo, however, feels pity for him, even though she still harbors anger for being previously slighted. The ending of Ovid’s narrative differs in that Narcissus doesn’t kill himself with a sword but simply withers away by the spring. His last words are “Alas, dear boy, vainly beloved!”

Amazingly, the self-love displayed by Ovid’s Narcissus carries over into the afterlife, for “even when he had been received into the infernal abodes, he kept on gazing on his image in the Stygian pool” (160). Echo, his naiad-sisters, and dryads prepare a funeral pyre in order to burn his remains, yet when they come upon the “place of his body,” all that is left is “a flower, its yellow center girt with white petals” (161).

The myth of Narcissus, regardless of the version, carries the moral message that excessive self-love is harmful. While the narrative details are slightly different, they are not as important as the common pedagogical aspects of the myth. Self-love is important, but it should not be the driving force in one’s life because it can render one incapable of loving another. This represents the societal aspect of the myth. The young boy loves himself instead of others, negating his social responsibility.

In the 20th century, Freud appropriated Ovid’s version of the myth, or at least the important elements of all three, and fashioned a theory that deals with self-centeredness. The term he used was Narcissism, which was introduced in his 1914 essay On Narcissism: An Introduction. Freud postulated that self-love is common and actually an important element in human survival. In Narcissism at a Glance, Dr. Sam Vaknin writes the following concerning Freud’s theory:
He described transitions from subject-directed libido to object-directed libido through the intermediation and agency of the parents. To be healthy and functional, the transitions must be smooth and unperturbed; otherwise neuroses result. Thus, if a child fails to attract their love and attention of his or her desired objects (e.g. of his parents), the child regresses to the narcissistic phase. (5)

Freud distinguishes between primary and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism “is the libidinal compliment to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.” As mentioned by Vaknin, the child must transition from a “subject-directed libido” to an “object-directed libido,” which, presumably, directs the self-love to the love of others. The libidinal forces are most often centered on an individual’s parents, who constitute the most immediate source.

If, however, this transition is not smoothly effectuated, then primary narcissism will develop into secondary narcissism that may prove socially and emotionally harmful. Vaknin stipulates that “the first occurrence of narcissism is adaptive,” but “regressing from a later stage to ‘secondary narcissism is maladaptive.’” Furthermore, it indicates a “failure to direct the libido to the ‘right’ targets (to objects, such as the child’s parents),” which if left untreated can lead to neurosis.

With regard to how this theory applies to the Romantic Poets, Shapiro claims that the “Romantics were in conflict with the external, social and material circumstances of their lives, with the parental figures of authority, and such conflict, as contemporary psychologists are quick to stress, always has an internal reflection.”
Shapiro’s study looks at narcissistic patterns in English Romantic poetry, for she finds in them “peculiarly strong narcissistic traits” (Intro 6). Furthermore, she pinpoints the essence of the English Romantic movement to lie in social conflict, yet this is often centralized around the poets’ relations with women:

The seed of English Romanticism, then, is conflict, conflict that has both an internal and external aspect. The poetry is largely concerned with the subjective experience of the solitary, isolated personality who feels abandoned and deserted as well as angry and rebellious. Although the poetry is characteristically narcissistic, among the works of the various Romantics one can distinguish differences in the levels of narcissistic regression... These differences are most evident in the images of women. (11)

Shapiro divides the Romantics into two camps regarding their relationships with women: those who “come to terms with angry and aggressive feelings and allow the woman a concrete reality,” and others “who portray her solely as an abstraction, as split between the ideal maiden and the wondrous witch” (11). The latter category perfectly fits the description of Byron’s and Shelley’s creation of Astarte and the veiled maiden respectively. These poems “express the narcissistic wound; the dominant feelings alternate violent rage and insatiable yearning for total fusion, for death;“ and “the self-images in these poems...are frequently idealized and grandiose” (12).

In Byron’s *Manfred* and Shelley’s *Alastor*, the reader is confronted with two protagonists who both suffer and die from the effects of narcissism. Manfred finds
himself trapped on this earth, finding solace neither in the spirit nor the body. He desires to soar far above this world, forever dwelling in the insatiable realm of knowledge. The allure of sensual love, however, tethers him to the earth, consuming him with unmerciful guilt and endless sorrow. Conversely, the Poet in Alastor avoids the enticements of the flesh and concentrates on an intellectual idealism arising from the depths of his soul. This unattainable earthly quest shelters him from the temptations of the ephemeral world, providing him something to strive for eternally. However, this passion for the ultimate truth, represented by the ethereal maid, thrusts him into a tumultuous whirlpool of solipsistic self-absorption, which leads to his untimely death.
Section II: Byron's *Manfred*

The main character in *Manfred* is the ultimate representation of the Byronic Hero. He is a man of uncontrollable passions, rousing intellect, abounding self-love and pride; a man consumed by guilt for some unknown crime; a lover of science and philosophy; and, finally, an outcast prone to nihilism. Atara Stein claims that a key component of *Manfred* is the exploration of love:

Byron’s examination of romantic love in this play is but a part of his exploration of the nature of the Romantic Hero. He wishes not only to analyze the narcissistic character of his hero, but also to reveal its decidedly mixed effects... Byron’s portrayal of Manfred, then, is thoroughly ambivalent; with each positive image he presents of his hero, he must counter it with a negative one... Byron reveals his simultaneously critical and admiring perspective on his hero in his portrayal of Manfred’s desire for self-sufficiency and his quest for transcendence; but he particularly develops these themes in his delineation of the destructive nature of narcissistic love. (190-191)

As the narrative develops, the reader witnesses Manfred at various stages of an obsession, ostensibly concerning a past crime that he has committed. This crime is connected with the death of his lover Astarte, who is presented as an idealized version of Manfred himself. On a biographical note, Astarte is suggested to be a fictionalized version of Augusta Leigh, Byron’s half sister with whom he had an illicit affair. The scandal is believed to be the impetus behind Byron leaving England in 1816.
Manfred describes Astarte in highly egocentric terms:

She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But soften’d all, and temper’d into beauty:
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind
To comprehend the universe: nor these,
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
Pity, and smiles, and tears—which I had not;
And tenderness—but that I had for her;
Humility—and that I never had.
Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—
I loved her, and destroy’d her! (2.2.105-117)

Stein writes that “Manfred desires a passive reflection of himself, one who will further his goal of transcendence of the human condition he so despises” (190). As Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection, Manfred falls in love with his own image, which is given outward expression in Astarte. Considering that Augusta Leigh was Byron’s own flesh and blood, his consummation with her is a form of self-consummation.

Joanna E. Rapf in *The Byronic Heroine: Incest and the Creative Process* writes that Byron’s ideal woman “has no important independent existence, but as a complement to her hero she is indispensable: he crumbles without her” (639). Taken
from conversations that Byron had with Lady Blessington, Rapf sums up Byron’s idealized female companion:

These women seek nothing for themselves except to serve and satisfy a single man. Each is as selfless as the Byronic hero is selfish. She is indeed his necessary opposite. Where on the surface he appears hard, she appears soft. She externalizes what he feels internally while, paradoxically, he does the same for her. He is meditative, she is instinctual, so at crucial moments, the hero tends to passivity, the heroine to action. In an ironic and perhaps unconscious reversal of traditional roles, the male is often the victim and the female the means of rescue. (640)

During the discussion with Lady Blessington, Byron comments on his created heroines: Haidee, Leila, Zuleika, Gulnare, and Medora. However, in doing so, he reveals that in the creative process he is fashioning women whom he ultimately desires in real life. Byron states, “These are the bright creatures of my fancy, with rounded forms, and delicacy of limbs, nearly so incompatible as to be rarely, if ever, united.” Byron’s heroines complete him by providing qualities that he himself is lacking. The creative process then becomes a form of psychological projection wherein Byron seeks the better half of himself:

Moreover, Rapf recognizes in this Jung’s idea of creativity as fulfilling some unconscious desire for a unification of the masculine and feminine aspects of man’s being:
Both the Byronic hero and heroine live behind masks which reflect the other’s inner being: his strong face the mirror of her heart and her soft face the mirror of his heart. They are not what they seem and neither can be whole without the reflection of the other. Women, therefore, so viciously satirized elsewhere in Byron’s poetry, emerge as the essential “other half,” what Jung has called the “anima,” of Byron’s heroic male. (641)

In the previous quotation describing Astarte, Byron is presenting his “other half” that, ironically, he later rejects. Rapf recognizes the “familiar pattern of incest,” which though as in “Byron’s case…may be autobiographical, its trunk and branches reach towards a universal idea of creativity” (641).

D. L. Macdonald in *Incest, Narcissism, and Demonality* recognizes her as being a narcissistic representation as well as a metonymic rendering of Augusta Leigh:

Astarte was Manfred’s ideal, and Freud has characterized idealizing love as essentially narcissistic: “the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own,’ in this case, Astarte’s feminine “gentler powers”; “We love it on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism.” Astarte is what Shelley calls an antitype, “a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness.” Sibling incest, as Byron presents it, is
a peculiarly convenient trope for this kind of narcissism
because—compared to parent-child incest, to homosexuality as
Byron understood it, or to conventional sexual relations—it
minimizes the differences between the lovers. (30)

By having a sexual relationship with his half sister, Byron was in effect having
relations with himself. Yet, as Stein writes, when “she fails to aid him, and, in fact,
tries to humanize him, he must destroy her” (190). While Stein is speaking of
Manfred, she could just as well be writing of Byron himself in that the infamy
brought upon Augusta Leigh from her relations with Byron destroyed her in the eyes
of her contemporaries.

The danger, however, in viewing Manfred as purely autobiographical is that
the reader then trivializes Byron’s creative process, rendering it as merely mimetic in
nature. Manfred and Byron then become interchangeable. This reading minimizes
Byron as a creative artist unable to stand apart from his work. While it could be true
that Byron is working through the issues of narcissism and incest, it is also true that
Manfred is more complex than simply a case study meant for explication. Through
the reading of the text, we must always question our assumptions, never settling on a
convenient reading that appears consistent with Byron’s life.

With regard to the structure of the poem, *Manfred* was written not for the
stage but more as a closet drama, where the characters are outward manifestations of
inner psychological processes. When viewed as such, the often one-dimensional and
mysterious characters become easily recognizable symbols of differing moods,
thoughts, and philosophical archetypes inside Manfred’s mind. The closet drama is
the perfect vehicle for an expression of narcissism as it focuses its attention on the inner mental processes of the protagonist.

At the beginning of the piece, we find Manfred isolated in a Gothic Hall. He muses on the consequences of scientific and philosophic knowledge, discovering that introversion leads to despair. He is haunted by something deep within, which overwhelms his mind with an unrelenting passion. Manfred attempts to assuage this awful pain by calling upon the Spirits of the earth. The Romantic poets would often represent the universe as divine or, at least, as possessing aspects of divinity. Manfred does not call on God, as such, for wisdom or assistance, but on the “spirits of the unbounded universe!” The Seven Spirits descend and, appearing before Manfred, state the following:

Earth, ocean, air, night, mountain, winds, thy star,
Are at they beck and bidding, child of clay!
Before thee at thy quest their spirits are—
What wouldst thou with us, son of mortals—say? (1.1.132-135)

It is interesting that the Spirits refer to Manfred as “child of clay.” This expression is used repeatedly, signifying a man’s mortal nature as a mere shapeless mass, which is subsequently molded and formed by society. The theme of individuality runs throughout the poem and Manfred is always self-conscious about his identity. This, as will be shown, is part of his problem.

Manfred requests from the Spirits forgetfulness and self-oblivion. This, however, is beyond their respective powers. This inability of the Spirits to placate Manfred establishes a dichotomy of mortal and immortal, or body and spirit,
which is prevalent in the poem. The Spirits cannot seem to understand a human’s pain and suffering. Manfred reminds them that even though they mock him, his inner essence, or soul, is identical to theirs:

The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,

The lighting of my being, is as bright,

Pervading, and far darting as your own,

And shall not yield to yours, though cooped in clay! (1.1.155-158)

The establishment of the body/spirit duality provides an intellectual partitioning of Manfred’s being. He is suggesting the neither the life of the body nor the soul is sufficient for contentment. By not yielding to either impulse, Manfred is rejecting a course of unfettered action as he prefers to wallow in the realm of perpetual uncertainty. Ultimately, it is Manfred’s desire to transcend this earth that leads to his own demise, which will be shown more fully as the narrative unfolds.

After the Spirits offer Manfred an extended life on earth, which he promptly rejects, Manfred politely petitions them to appear in their “accustomed forms,” stating that the music from their voices admits “sweet and melancholy sounds, as music on the waters.” The Spirits respond that they have no individual forms “beyond the elements / Of which we are the mind and principle.” This is a very interesting passage, especially when juxtaposed with elements from Alastor, because it reflects aspects of Platonism that appear in both works. Plato’s theory of forms specifies that the “divine mind” holds within itself the archetypal forms of the earthly object that they represent. Therefore, for Plato, the goal for the
individual is to intellectually concentrate on these forms, or ideals, instead of limiting one’s gaze to mundane existence.

At the start of scene II, Manfred appears alone on a mountain. After speaking of his desire to die, Manfred states that it is his “fatality to live” and that something from within holds him to this barren life. Manfred’s soliloquy reveals his dilemma that is similar to Hamlet: he resides on this earth as a tortured stranger:

> But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,
> Half dust, half deity, alike unfit,
> To sink or soar, with our mixed essence make
> A conflict of its elements, and breathe
> The breath of degradation and of pride,
> Contending with low wants and lofty wills,
> Till our mortality predominates. (1.2.39-45)

Once again we are presented with the dichotomy of body and soul. This passage not only reveals Manfred’s unstable nature, but also alludes to man’s own inner conflict. This becomes apparent with the arrival of the Abbot, a symbol of the antiquated life, who makes the observation concerning Manfred’s dilemma. In this passage, Manfred is suggesting that man can come to a peaceful reconciliation of the extremes. However, the sin of pride holds him back from self-realization and earthly fulfillment.

Developing this idea of a duality in man’s composition, Stein sees it as a type of warfare:
Manfred sees man's two sides as fundamentally irreconcilable, causing a "conflict of its elements." Thus the passage cites extremes: "half dust, half deity," "sink or soar," "low wants and lofty will." Yet Byron's use of alliteration reinforces the notion that these qualities do coexist in one being, mankind, and inability to reconcile them will lead to despair. And ultimately mortality must "predominate"; Manfred's existence revolves around trying to evade that inescapable fact...Manfred cannot find a suitable combination of his opposing elements; nor can he gravitate to one or the other, thus "dramatizing what for Byron always was the essential war, the one within man himself." (196)

Since Manfred believes that this duality can never be reconciled, it is difficult for him to in effect choose one element of his being in which to focus all his intellectual attention. Because of this, his indecision leads to inaction.

Before Manfred meets the Chamois Hunter, he hears the shepherd's pipe in the distance. He makes another indirect reference to Plato, once again alluding to the "viewless spirit of a lovely sound, / A living voice...which made me!" Plato's concept of the music of the spheres is a metaphor for earthly and heavenly harmony. Individuals before birth reside in oneness with divinity, represented in this instance by music, and will, on occasion, recollect this beatitude during life.

When Manfred finally encounters the Chamois Hunter, we are presented with the symbol of pure earthly existence. Manfred, oblivious at first to the Hunter, speaks dramatically of the tumultuous mists and clouds that circle around
him. The uncertain and violent nature of his surroundings provides an apt metaphor for his current suicidal condition. The Chamois Hunter, upon reaching Manfred, safely leads him to “surer footing,” and then idly comments on the fact that he would have made a fine hunter. Characters often, upon meeting Manfred, speak of his inclination toward their way of life. Nevertheless, Manfred always rejects their positive admonitions, and stubbornly shuns whatever human affection and sympathy they offer, preferring to control his own destiny and avoid conformity.

The Chamois Hunter leads Manfred to his cottage in the woods. Manfred claims that his “mind and body are unlike unfit / To trust each other.” After he offers Manfred some wine, Manfred speaks dramatically about blood and the “veins of his father,” stating:

When we were in our youth, and had one heart,
And loved each other as we should not love,
And this was shed: but still it rises up,
Coloring the clouds, that shut me out from heaven,
Where thou are not—and I shall never be. (2.1.26-30)

When viewed biographically, the above quotation could refer to Augusta Leigh. Obviously, the blood of Byron’s father literally flowed in Ms. Leigh. This presents an interesting personal reference. The crime of incest indirectly led to him being exiled from England, which is a form of being “shut... out from heaven.” His leaving England forced Byron into a life of endless wandering and dissipation. Related to the text, Manfred is shown as suffering from some terrible
guilt, leaving him forever sullied. The blood, which ambiguously refers only to Manfred's, poetically colors his existence, always reflecting back an image of his crime.

In Spring 1816, Byron left England for good following his separation from Anne Isabella Milbanke, the cousin of Byron's former lover Lady Caroline Lamb. The Deed of Separation was finalized on April 21, 1816. Lady Byron took Ada, their daughter, with her. Lady Caroline was obviously on the side of her cousin; Byron was alone. Rumors followed that Byron had an incestuous relationship with Augusta Leigh, which produced a daughter, Elizabeth Medora Leigh, as well as claims of violence against Isabella Milbanke. This love triangle led to three women being disgraced by Byron and two children subsequently abandoned by their father. Byron was definitely not held at this time as a paragon of virtue by the English public.

D.L. Macdonald, however, writes on how many scholars have been apprehensive to analyze Manfred's guilt as reflecting Byron's remorse over his relationship with his half sister:

In trying to make sense of such a work, the critics have been surprisingly reluctant to discuss the two most remarkable things about it: its treatment of incest (which accounts for the hero's remorse) and its relation to the Faust tradition (which accounts for the spirits). In the first case, they may have been reluctant to bring in possibly impertinent biographical material, even though Byron
was scarce the only Romantic writer to deal with incest, and his use of the motif does not have to be discussed biographically. (26)

The brother/sister relationship represents the pinnacle of narcissism in that Byron, through consummation with his half sister, is manifesting a romantic longing for himself. This biographical reading explains the guilt connected to Astarte, yet, as previously mentioned, this interpretation negates a distance between author and creation. Byron can obviously be commenting on incest without alluding to his own relationship with Augusta Leigh. It certainly does not have to be an either/or situation.

Stein, writing on the above-stated passage from Manfred, comments:

This passage is significant in its revelation of the results of Manfred’s extreme narcissism. Astarte’s death was inevitable, for Manfred’s image here merges the blood the brother and sister share and the blood that has been shed when Astarte died. It is as if the fact of Manfred and Astarte’s relationship leads inevitably to her destruction, for her death is the ultimate manifestation of Manfred’s egotism...Clearly his destruction of Astarte is a form of suicide; he cannot see her as separate from himself. In effect, he destroys the human side of himself. (202)

In the narrative, the consequences of the previous act between Astarte and Manfred continue to torture Manfred, which keeps him from enjoying his present life. His endless wandering, like Byron’s travels after leaving England, keeps him from ever experiencing contentment.
When the Chamois Hunter offers to Manfred the aid of a holy man and suggests the virtue of patience to quell his agony, Manfred replies, “Patience and patience! Hence—that world was made / For brutes of burthen, not for birds of prey...I am not of thy order.” In this passage, and further along when Manfred describes the peaceful, contented life of the hunter, Manfred is completely denying himself access to such rustic life, preferring to sequester himself inside his implacable mind. Manfred's reference to birds of prey presents another allusion to his unrevealed crime. The reader must ask what he has done, short of murder, to deserve such a fate. When Manfred finally leaves the hunter, he descends to the valley beneath, and through a magical incantation, he calls upon the Witch of the Alps.

If the Chamois Hunter symbolizes a life of pure material and earthly existence, the Witch represents the opposite: an unadulterated spirit free from the chains of mortal life. Manfred describes her in language similar to that of the ethereal maid in Alastor:

Beautiful spirit! With thy hair of light,
And dazzling eyes of glory, in whose form
The charms of earth’s least mortal daughters grow
To an unearthly stature, in an essence
Of purer elements. (2.2.13-17)

In a Platonic sense, she represents the ideal of beauty of which all earthly forms partake. For Manfred, she symbolizes the immortal perfection for which he strives. As he continues to describe her, he reveals his once fervent spiritual desire:
...in thy calm clear brown,

Wherein is glassed serenity of soul,

Which of itself shows immortality. (2.2.25-27)

This scene is perhaps the most important section of the poem. Firstly, the Witch asks Manfred what he desires; he replies “to look upon thy beauty—nothing further.” He then states that he has pierced the veil of reality to discover the underlining essence controlling the universe, i.e. the Seven Spirits, impotent though they be. Finally, the Witch requests that Manfred relate the story of his life.

Manfred presents a portrait of his youth where he led a life divorced from human contact, completely isolated from the “creatures of clay” that surrounded him. His joys were to be found in the wilderness and in his thoughts, where he was immersed in the science and wisdom of antiquity:

I made mine eyes familiar with Eternity,

Such as, before me, did the Magi, and

He who from out their fountain dwellings raised

Eros and Anteros, at Gadara,

As I do thee—and with my knowledge grew

The thirst of knowledge, and the power and joy

Of this most bright intelligence... (2.2.89-96)

The Magi searched for divinity and found it in Christ. The second reference, the individual who raised Eros, god of love, and Anteros, god of unrequited love, is significant for our study. Iamblichus, the Neoplatonic philosopher of the 4th century A.D., is the individual to whom Byron alludes. In keeping with the
Platonic theme, Manfred is pointing to a life spent in constant philosophic contemplation of the underlining forms or thoughts that govern existence. Plato states in the *Symposium* that “Eros is love of the beautiful, so Eros is necessarily a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, and being a philosopher, intermediate between wisdom and ignorance” (145).

Furthermore, in the *Symposium*, Plato writes of the “Ascent of Beauty Itself,” which corresponds to his theory of the ladder of love or virtue. An individual starts with the contemplation of beautiful things, ascending upward to the generality of beautiful human bodies, beautiful practices, beautiful studies, and, finally, the essence of beauty itself. Plato states that this essence will be “pure, unalloyed, unmixed, not full of human flesh and colors, and the many other kinds of nonsense which attach to mortality” (153). The Witch represents this essence of pure beauty. Diotima’s definition of Eros in the *Symposium* posits that most mortals when they love “are seeking the other half of themselves” (147). This corresponds to a lower level or step on Plato’s ladder of love.

When Manfred relates to the Witch his descent from the heights of knowledge, he places the cause of his decline in the love of another human, a woman who complements his own identity:

She was like me in lineaments; her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;
But softened all, and tempered into beauty:

..........................................................................................
Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—

I loved her, and destroyed her! (2.2.107-10, 117-18)

Manfred then states that her blood was shed in a manner unknown to the reader. However, he himself was in some way responsible for the act. The Witch chides Manfred for forsaking the knowledge of eternity, and falling back into “recreant mortality.”

Manfred has fallen from the top step of Plato’s ladder to the very bottom. All those years of intellectual striving were in vain; he succumbed to the temptation of mortal flesh. From this failure, it is possible that Byron is suggesting that Plato’s idealistic philosophy is either untenable or undesirable.

While it is true that Manfred does attempt to transcend this earth through the pursuit of knowledge, his love for another human being draws him back to reality. Byron, who certainly indulged in the pleasures of the flesh, presents Manfred as suffering from the temptations that affect the masses even though he is superior intellectually to them. While the mind/body dualism is an extant theme that is played out throughout the narrative, its seeming irresolution, at least at this point in the narrative, suggests that Byron is realistic about man’s mortal condition.

Continuing his confession, Manfred tells the Witch that he is tortured by demons that his sciences and superhuman art cannot eradicate. The only thing that she might do for him is to wake the dead. The Witch requests that if Manfred swears obedience to her, she will assuage his pain. Manfred’s response is typical. He states that he will never be a slave to those who serve him, alluding to his ambivalence and lack of commitment toward disparate modes of life: the earthly
Hunter, the spiritual Witch, and, later, the religious Abbot. He will not conform to any one avenue of existence for fear of losing his individuality. Hence, he lives in constant confusion and uncertainty.

Stein makes a connection between Manfred’s ideal as stated in the above passage and Shelley’s concept of the ideal love:

Manfred’s love for Astarte follows exactly the pattern Shelley sets out in “On Love”; Shelley describes the ideal object of love as “not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is composed; a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our soul” (p.202)...She apparently shares his “lone thoughts,” his search for “hidden knowledge,” and his intellectual ability. Thus, she mirrors her lover in his voluntary isolation from his fellow beings and in his superhuman aspirations. Similarly, the Poet’s dream lover in Shelley’s Alastor was a poet as well and shared his interests. (200-201)

Stein believes that both Byron and Shelley find self-love to be preferable to loving another human being. The desired woman becomes an idealized self, a projection of their virtues minus their faults. When Manfred confesses that he “destroyed” his beloved, he, in essence, is speaking of destroying himself, at least in the sense of denying himself a satisfying relationship on this earth.

Furthermore, an interesting aspect of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is that the person really dislikes himself and overcompensates by creating a grandiose
persona that he will employ in navigating through the world. What Stein overlooks is the self-hatred that is implicit in narcissism. The narcissist cannot be successful at love because of an intense self-loathing that convinces him that he is unlovable and, hence, undesirable.

Rapf, however, writes the following on the subject of both poets’ attitude toward romantic love:

For Shelley, love was a supremely creative act, but unselfish. In the *Defense of Poetry* he even argued that the emancipation of women was essential for the true flourishing of the human imagination, for love is only possible under the condition of freedom. Byron too argued that “Love is for the free” (*Don Juan*, V, 127), but for him, the most intense love was self-love. “The only love that never changes its object is self-love,” he said to Lady Blessington... For Byron, therefore, the ideal woman had to be that which was closest to himself, of the same blood, flesh, spirit: a sister. (642-643)

While it is clear that narcissism factors into both poets’ view of love, Shelley, at least as presenting in *The Defense of Poetry*, argues for a women’s political freedom, which demonstrates an ability to empathise with another person, especially the opposite sex. This view, however, differs from Shelley’s portrayal of the Poet’s obsession in *Alastor*.

After the Witch disappears, Manfred states that there is “one resource / Still in my science—I can call the dead.” Throughout the poem, Manfred relies
on science—or a form thereof—to provide assistance. Historically, this points to
the obsession in the 19th century with the utility and saving grace of science.
However, the scientific form to which Manfred refers is probably closer to
Alchemy than the more textbook scientific practices as we know them today.
Alchemy, with its mysterious searching for perfection and the final “hidden
element,” corresponds well with the Platonism extant in the poem. Even though
philosophy and science are traditionally separate, Manfred combines them under
the rubric of knowledge.

When the Arimanes and Destines, other spiritual agents, surround
Manfred and ask him to prostrate himself, Manfred refuses. The First Destiny,
after a request from the Spirits to kill him, speaks eloquently of Manfred’s
composition as more than mere “clay,” and points to the two things apparent in
his downfall:

That knowledge is not happiness, and science
But an exchange of ignorance for that
Which is another kind of ignorance.
This is not all—the passions, attributes
Of earth and heaven, from which no power, nor being,
Nor breath from the worm upward is exempt,
Have pierced his heart... (2.4.63-68)

The First Destiny indicates that the pursuit of science does not lead to happiness
and that the emotional side of man should not be discarded. Manfred then
requests the Spirits to raise from the dead his beloved Astarte. She appears and
Manfred asks her to forgive him. She states that tomorrow his mortal life will end; then she vanishes, leaving Manfred to wallow in his agony.

In Act II, the Destines recognize that Manfred, while human, possesses an “immortal nature” similar to theirs:

...his sufferings

Have been of an immortal nature—like

Our own; his knowledge and his powers and will,

As far as is compatible with clay,

Which clogs the ethereal essence, have been such

As clay hath seldom borne. (2.4.54-58)

Once again Byron establishes the body/mind duality in that Manfred has the mind for transcendence, as the Destines recognize, yet he is trapped in “mortal coil,” which tethers him to mundane existence. Developing this concept, Stein writes:

We see here the limitations Manfred must face; even his superior abilities must be “compatible with clay, / Which clogs the etereal essence.” However much he tries, he cannot deny his humanity; the more knowledge he attains the more aware he becomes aware of his limitations. (197)

Manfred is never able to find a harmonious balance between these extremes, which eventually results in him abandoning this life in hopes of becoming pure spirit, yet, as we shall see, is not successfully realized.

Act II, scene II opens with Manfred isolated in a chamber of his castle. His servants comment on the peculiar behavior of Manfred, as opposed to that of
other counts in the past. One particular servant, Manuel, tells of that night when Astarte and Manfred were alone in the tower:

How occupied, we knew not, but with him
The sole companion of his wanderings
And watchings—her, whom of all earthly things
Have lived, the only thing he seemed to love,—
As he, indeed, by blood was bound to do,

The lady Astarte, his— (3.3.42-47)

To complete the last line with sister is very tempting. If this were the case, why is Byron being so reticent about the details of their relationship? Wouldn’t a full disclosure only add to the complexity of the narrative? Perhaps he was attempting to psychologically deal with the consequences of his relationship with Augusta Leigh, yet a complete confession, albeit through fictional means, was beyond his capacity, either because of personal or professional reasons. However, within the above passage we have an eyewitness account of some strange occurrence, certainly alluding to the mystery surrounding his relationship with Astarte.

In Act III, Manfred meets the Abbot, an individual who can administer the earthly forgiveness that he so earnestly seeks. Therefore, if Manfred repents his sins, he will be saved. Manfred states that “there is not power in holy men,” and fervently rejects all claims at earthly redemption. He then explains to the Abbot that there are individuals on the earth who perish from a plethora of things: study, toil, weariness, insanity, and broken hearts. He, unfortunately, has suffered from
them all. The Abbot departs, stating that Manfred would have “been a noble creature,” if his “glorious elements” had been better mixed.

In the final scene, Manfred is depicted as holding conference with the universe. The universe, especially the moon, has been a more “familiar face than man,” and through it, he has learned “the language of another world.” The moon, which also appears in Alastor, symbolizes eternity shining over the transient world. When the Abbot appears, he once again petitions Manfred to repent; Manfred replies that his hour of death has come. The Spirits rise to carry him away, but Manfred emphatically states that he will die the way he lived: alone.

Even in the process of death, he is unable to relinquish his sovereignty. The Spirits are bemused that this mortal, who sought to invade the invisible world so as to become their equal, will tenaciously hold onto his wretched life. Manfred responds that it was not the Spirits who gave him power, but “superior sciences,” and that the Spirits themselves will never control him:

Thou never shalt possess me, that I know:
What I have done is done; I bare within
A torture which could nothing gain from thine:
The mind which is immortal makes itself
Requital for its good or evil thoughts,

When stripped of this mortality, derives
No color from the fleeting things without,
But is absorbed in sufferance or in joy. (3.4.126-133)
Manfred presumes that he will in effect either be punished or rewarded for his thoughts on earth. There is no outside earthly agent to provide expiation for sins or to offer redemption. The burden rests on the individual. Neither the Spirits, symbols of a nature religion, nor the Abbot, the symbol of traditional religion, can wrest him from his torment. Manfred dies as he lived: buried beneath a suffocating mound of guilt.

The poem begins with Manfred alone in the dead of night, musing on life. The poems ends with Manfred alone, save for the Abbot, in the darkness of the castle’s tower, stubbornly refusing earthly assistance until the end. However, immediately before Manfred’s death, he reaches out his hand to the Abbot and offers a bittersweet parting of “Fare thee well!” This warm sign of friendship signifies that possibly Manfred realized, albeit too late, that his defiance in the face of humanity, and his inability throughout life to devote himself faithfully and wholeheartedly to any pursuit, goal, or person, was perhaps the flaw leading to his downfall.

Whether it was the Spirits, the Chamois Hunter, the Witch, the mysterious Astarte, or his intellectual endeavors with science and philosophy that stimulated his interests, Manfred always seemed to go far enough to taste the fruit of endless possibilities, only to have his self-conscious impulse against conformity wrest him from total commitment. He was afraid of losing his individuality; afraid of being molded by an outside agent. In the end, this obsession killed him. It was the guilt connected with his love Astarte, a love that linked him to this earth, but
also possibly, as with Byron, to the crime of incest, that overwhelmed him in the 
flames of a sadomasochistic narcissism.
Section III: Shelley’s *Alastor*

Shelley wrote *Alastor* in 1815. Initially, the narrative poem did not have a title, but after it passed through the hands of friend Thomas Love Peacock, it received the name “Alastor,” which derives from Roman mythology and means “evil genius.” This epithet neither applies to the protagonist nor to Shelley himself. It refers to the spirit that inspires the Poet’s creative apparatus, acting as the impetus not only for his thoughts but also his actions.

In the fall of 1815, Shelley was living in London with Mary Wollstonecraft when he wrote *Alastor*. It was not an immediate success, which riled Shelley for many years to come. Many scholars have postulated that the Poet, who follows an idealized vision, is a literary representation of Wordsworth, whom Shelley was reading at this stage of his career.

The next year is important for this study because this is when Shelley was first introduced to Byron. Shelley and Mary decided to travel to Lake Geneva by the urging of Claire Clairemont, Mary’s stepsister, who had been having an affair with Byron since April, which immediately preceded his self-imposed exile from England. Supposedly, Byron was no longer romantically interested in Claire, yet she used Shelley as a means of securing another meeting with Byron, who was traveling in Belgium at the time. Byron rented the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva with his friend, John William Polidori, and soon after, Shelley, Mary, and Claire joined them. They took a small cottage down the road.

This summer is extremely important for Byron and Shelley scholarship because it provided the creative fodder for some of their most famous works. Shelley
was inspired to write two of his well-recognized poems during this time: *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Mont Blanc*. Byron, in turn, wrote Part III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as well as *Manfred* later that year. Furthermore, Mary Wollstonecraft, who eventually became Mary Shelley, penned *Frankenstein*, which came about during a night of ghost story telling by the group. Incidentally, some scholars believe that Shelley’s hand can be seen in Mary’s masterpiece. This was indeed a productive period for all involved.

Shelley, during this time period, was studying idealism, which was documented in a diary entry by his friend Polidori, dated June 8, 1816:

> Up at 9; went to Geneva on horseback, and then to Diodati to see Shelley; back; dined; into the new boat—Shelley’s,—and talked, till the ladies’ brains whizzed with giddiness, about idealism. Back; rain, puffs of wind; mistake. (121)

From June 9:

> Up by 1: breakfasted. Read Lucian. Dined. Did the same: tea’d. Went to Hentsch: came home. Looked at the moon, and ordered packing-up. (121)

Evidently, the discussion of idealism was significant enough for Polidori to mention it. The reference to the moon, while not important in and of itself, proves interesting because both Byron and Shelley present the moon so prominently in *Manfred* and *Alastor*. It is most definitely a natural object that they enjoyed contemplating in life.

It is difficult to fathom that during the boating excursions and nightly discussions of June 1816 Shelley discussed neither idealism nor *Alastor* with Byron.
Alastor, while written in 1815, was published at the beginning of 1816. At least as documented in his poetry, Byron was not a direct proponent of idealistic thinking, especially Platonism, even though it is so thoroughly discussed, albeit not being directly named as such, in Manfred. On the subject of Byron’s rejection of Platonism, Peter Cochran writes:

Byron would seem to have been an instinctive foe to transcendentalism itself. Most of his early epistolary references to Plato, for example, use the philosopher’s name simply as a synonym for sex (BLJ 4:135) or for the avoidance of sex (BLJ 3:136) and some of his later poetical references are couched in similar terms—either of ignorance or skepticism. (9-10)

Furthermore, in a letter written to Francis Hodgson, Byron states, “I am no Platonist, I am nothing at all” (BLJ 2: 89). In Manfred, Byron is simply working through issues pursuant to idealism while not becoming an adherent to it.

Their study of idealism is important in this study, for the topic appears in their poetry at this time. In September 1816, immediately following his time with Shelley, Byron wrote Manfred while traveling in the Bernese Alps. Evidently, he was not pleased with Act III, which he re-wrote in February 1817. As previously mentioned, Byron appears to be working out elements of his failed marriage to Annabelle, Milbanke, with obvious attention being paid to his incestuous affair with Augusta Leigh. Manfred discusses the allure of idealism, yet the power of the flesh always pulls him back to this earth. For Shelley, the Poet is much more comfortable within the realm of ideas than Manfred.
Considering the fact that the narratives are similar, one has to speculate as to influence, particularly in the case of Byron presenting *Manfred* as a response to *Alastor*. Since Byron presumably discussed *Alastor* during the summer of 1816, it was on his mind when constructing *Manfred* later that year. Furthermore, each poet was influenced by Thomas Taylor, who translated works by Pausanias and the Neoplatonist Proclus. Shelley, in two letters written to Ollier in the summer of 1817, wishes to appropriate recently translated works by Taylor:

Be so good as to send me "Tasso’s Lament" a poem just published; & Taylors Translations of Pausanias. You will oblige me by sending them without delay, as I have immediate need for them.

(L PBS 1: 549)

And, from a letter written August 3, 1817, he writes:

Do you know is Taylors Pausanias to be procured & at what price.

(L PBS 1: 549)

Obviously, Shelley’s request comes after his writing of *Alastor*, yet if one believes that *Manfred* is indeed a poetic response, then Shelley’s desire might suggest that he knew of Byron’s reading of Taylor’s translations and he wished to engage in a dialectic, which could have been effectuated in *Prometheus Unbound*, written in late 1818.

Byron definitely knew of Taylor’s translations back in late spring and early summer 1816, immediately preceding his time with Shelley. Below are two excerpts from letters from Byron to Hobhouse:

From Brussels, May 1, 1816:
Will you bring out (Taylors ditto) when you come. (BLJ 5: 74)

And, from Evian, June 23, 1616:

Bring with you also for me some bottles of Calcined Magnesia – a new Sword cane – procured by Jackson – he alone knows the sort – (my last tumbled into this lake – ) some of Waite’s red tooth powder -- & tooth brushes – a Taylor’s Pawrsanias – and – I forgot the other things.

(BLJ 5: 80)

Hobhouse did in fact bring Pausanias as well as the other items to Byron in Switzerland. This is documented in a July 9th letter from Hobhouse to Byron in which he mentions “Prafsanias,” “pistol brushes, cundums,” and “potash.” It appears that through the urgings of his friend Polidori, Byron became interested in Taylor’s Neoplatonist translations. Therefore, there is little doubt that Byron was in possession of Taylor’s work during his time with Shelley in 1816.

This is important in that it shows that both poets were discussing the subject of idealism, which obviously shaped the protagonists that they created. Both Manfred and Alastor follow these ideal creations that have no real essence in this world, yet their narrative approach to each elucidates both of their attitudes toward the idealistic philosophy, at least as presented by the Neoplatonists. Manfred is not willing to wholeheartedly give himself over to intellectual speculation whereas Alastor follows his ideal construction to the end. While Shelley did question the epistemological implications of idealism in *Alastor*, he also allowed his protagonist to submit fully to its allure. This, as will be shown, results in Alastor’s eventual demise.
While Manfred's self-love is focused on his relationship with Astarte, the Poet's narcissistic longings are manifested more in an intellectual idealism that has no real prototype in reality. This suggests that Alastor had little capacity to actually form an amorous relationship with a woman, whereas Manfred at least loved and lost. Both protagonists suffer from intense case of self-obsession that renders them incapable of experiencing life with another. The Poet's mental obsession with idealism, which is reflected in this study by a discussion of Shelley's philosophical musings, makes his isolation all the more intense because of distance from corporeality. The Poet's focus is always on transcendence. Manfred, on the other hand, does have multiple encounters with human beings that suggest a degree of humanity in him. Nevertheless, narcissism proves to be destructive for both, regardless of its manifestation.

In Shelley's poem Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude, the protagonist is a poet of extraordinary knowledge and acumen. The preface, which provides much assistance in interpretation, speaks of the Poet as "a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius" who through "familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic" leads to the "contemplation of the universe." He studies all the wisdom of the ages but is still unfulfilled. The beautiful sensations afforded by the external world deeply sink into the "frame of his conceptions," providing an array of intellectual possibilities. The next section taken from the preface is important for understanding our protagonist:

So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed.
But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. (4-6)

Furthermore, the preface states that the Poet is a thinker of sublime ideas, and that he imagines an ideal "prototype" that "unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture." He attempts to capture this image, which in the poem is represented as the veiled maiden, yet "blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave."

Cynthia M. Baer views the poem, as well as Manfred and Keats's Endymion, within the context of androgyney. Her ideas concerning the quest for unity of the masculine and feminine, a quest that involves a unification of the self, has elements of narcissism in its longing for a personal ideal:

The Alastor Poet's quest for his prototype is indeed a quest for what Shelley later calls the epipsyche, and the epipsyche here recalls the image of the androgyne. The veiled maiden that emanates from the Poet's own mind in a dream is the imagined projection of the self and the perfect image of wholeness—she is the "soul within his soul." (26)

The idealized veiled maiden is presented as Shelley's perfected self that arises from the depths of his soul. His longing for her represents a longing for himself, yet, unlike Manfred, the Poet's creation has nothing to do with his past life, or with any requisite guilt, as she is purely an imaginative construct.
Shelley presents this poem as an allegorical representation of "the most interesting situations of the human mind." Later, he qualifies this experience by stating that the obsession of the Poet and his endless striving after the "Power," which awakens him to the true essence of the world, is a more glorious, and one can assume, moral existence than that of the pathetic masses, who throughout life live without passion, sympathy, love, or hope. They "constitute...the lasting misery and loneliness of the world." Therefore, Shelley is not only describing his protagonist but also providing a moral and instructive framework in which to read the poem. This is an interesting stance to take considering the fatal outcome of the Poet.

One of the problems with reading *Alastor* as opposed to *Manfred* is that with Manfred we are provided with characters that make up the narrative. In *Alastor*, however, we are told by Shelley that the entire piece is an allegory. On the subject of allegorical representation in *Alastor*, Harold Hoffman writes:

Yet it retains a suggestion of the methods of allegory in that the desires of the mind are externalized and given symbolical representation...In this process Shelley depends very largely on natural objects and airy phantoms...Thus the line between symbolical representation and natural background is at best somewhat vague. (10)

Therefore, when approaching the poem, a reader can sometimes become confused as to whether certain external elements are symbols or reality. If the entire poem is indeed an allegory about the vicissitudes of the human mind, then one can assume that everything contained therein is a projection of inner processes. This, as previously mentioned, can present difficulties in interpretation.
This reading straddles the fence by allowing both elements at once. It will only symbolically view those exterior objects that complement, and are contingent upon, the allegorical reading of the poem. Yet, it will approach non-allegorically those elements of the poem that drive the narrative. This will give direction to the study and a course for interpretation.

The poem begins with the narrator calling on mother earth for assistance and guidance in the telling of the tale. The protagonist is then portrayed as a solitary wanderer, like Wordworth’s leech gatherer, who lived and died alone. He is shown as a lover of divine philosophy, appropriating inspiration from his environment. However, his quest for knowledge does not satiate his fervent intellectual appetite; thus, he leaves his home to search for truth in foreign lands. His steps, controlled by elevated thoughts, lead the Poet to all the classical cities as he gathers experience that he could not appropriate through books. The moon, symbolizing eternity, is presented as sharing space with the halls of antiquity, offering a spiritual contrast to the ephemeral world. The Poet is shown concentrating on his immediate surroundings, as he attempts to gain some ontological understanding of the universe:

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

Hoffman concludes from the above quotation and elsewhere that “the poet’s education as revealed in both preface and poem agrees with Locke’s theory of knowledge” (12). In other words, the Poet’s mind contains no innate thoughts,
concepts or ideas, but is completely formed by worldly sensations. Hoffman continues by alluding to Shelley’s short essay *On Life*, written at the time of *Alastor*, which reflects Locke’s ideas in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Presumably, Shelley was perusing this essay while writing *Alastor*.

Hoffman states that through Sir William Drummond’s *Academical Questions*, which incorporates Berkeley’s philosophy of sensations controlling the mind, Shelley gleaned aspects of materialistic thinking that helped form the Poet’s mind in *Alastor*. An interpretation of the poem through this philosophical lens advances to a point and then is no longer applicable. On the subject of Berkeley, Albert Gerard writes on the influence his writing had on Shelley during the composition of *Alastor*:

> It should be remembered the Shelley, prompted by Southey, had studied the philosophy of Berkeley in 1812-13. The latter’s influence made itself felt in two essays written by Shelley in 1815, the year of *Alastor*: *On Life* and Speculations on Metaphysics, where the ingredients of the immaterialistic trend in English Romanticism are conveniently brought together. (171)

Shelley’s philosophical interests influence the narrative development of *Alastor*, for the protagonist reflects different schools of thought at key points in the story. The Poet’s journey not only represents a physical journey but also, more importantly, an epistemological one as well.

After musing about existence, the Poet meets the Arab maiden, who provides sustenance and motherly affection. She is the first earthly figure presented in the poem. After administering to the Poet, she returns to her “cold home.” Within the
description of her, there is not one line that points to the Poet's recognition of her. It appears that he is totally oblivious to other humans. Furthermore, this is the second instance of a domicile being labeled as cold, for society, as presented by Shelley, is shown as being alienating and uninviting.

Following the meeting with the Arab maiden, the Poet wanders through the wilderness until reaching "the vale of Cashmere, far within / Its loneliest dell." The surroundings provide a "natural bower," allowing the Poet to fall asleep and dream the following:

A vision on his sleep
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
Heard in the calm of thought... (149-154)

The appearance of the veiled maiden temporarily fills the void. Hoffman infers that the veiled maiden, or vision of ideal beauty, could correspond to the Neoplatonist thinker Plotinus' idea that "the soul beholds itself in the mirror of matter." Even though as mentioned, Shelley did not appropriate Taylor's translations of the Neoplatonists until after writing Alastor, he definitely knew Platonism and, presumably Neoplatonism, at this time. Polidori's journal entry from the summer of 1816 shows his interest in idealism. However, one must reference his essay On Love to better understand the meaning of the passage at hand:
We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man...a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper paradise, which pain, and sorrow, and evil dare not overleap. (1071)

This description is similar to the idea presented in Plotinus. Taylor translated the concept of Plotinus: "The souls of men, however, beholding the image of themselves, like that of Bacchus in a mirror, were from thence impelled to descend" (88).

Plotinus states that each soul had its archetype in the ideal world, and as long as this ideal exists, so does man. Shelley, whether aware of these concepts of Plotinus or not while writing Alastor, comes intuitively close in the poem to reflecting the philosopher's thoughts.

In connection with Hoffman's interpretation that the mind of the Poet was formed by his environment, the sudden appearance of the veiled maiden seems to contradict, or at least tarnish, his epistemological reading. If the Poet's mind is externally shaped, then it would not be possible for him to possess any internal, or a priori, ideas. However, this could suggest that Shelley altered his own epistemological theory. Historically, this reading is consistent with the Romantic's opposition to the overly rationalistic philosophy of the 18th century. In such a stance, Platonism was preferred to the philosophy of Locke. As presented earlier, Shelley stated that Alastor was an allegorical representation of the human mind. This shows
that either Shelley believed that the mind assimilates knowledge both internally and externally, or that he completely changed his opinion on the formation of the mind. It is an either/or situation.

Further along in the description of the veiled maiden, the Poet states that “knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme.” He also mentions that she is a lover of divine liberty and also a poet. She is presented as the Poet’s ideal mirror image. The Poet, like Narcissus, falls in love with his own reflection. Tilottama Rajan writes on how an idea becomes a referent after which the Poet can now strive:

> The intense physicality of what the Poet projects as a Platonic form, so troubling that he swoons rather than consummate his love, enacts the embodiment of vision: the linguistic process by which the Idea is given a body in words that do not exist by themselves but inevitably refer to other elements in the chain or system. To begin with, the veiled woman is characterized in terms of allegorical abstractions that allow her song... to bear a direct relation to transcendental referents.

By focusing on a woman created purely from his imagination, the Poet is negating any physical consummation, preferring to keep the desire on the intellectual level. Love becomes self-directed rather than object-directed. Later, the veiled maiden is described as emanating a “strange symphony,” which, as in Manfred, soothed our protagonist. However, she disappears as the Poet falls asleep, leaving nothing but darkness in his “vacant brain.”
When the Poet awakens, he is depressed. The veiled maiden is gone and so is his new found inspiration. His eyes “Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly / As ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven.” The Poet looks toward heaven searching for his ideal. The quest for the idealized woman places the Poet in the throes of an intellectual narcissism that negates his ability to contemplate his surroundings.

Whereas Manfred attempts to climb the ladder of knowledge only to find that he is a composite of man and spiritual entity, the Poet strives to shed his “mortal coil” by concentrating on an image beyond the reaches of this world. He ventures to an extreme that can only lead to eventual self-destruction:

... wildly he wandered on,

Day after day a weary waste of hours,

Bearing within his life the brooding care

That ever fed on it decaying flame. (244-247)

The mountaineer’s encounter with the Poet upon the “dizzy precipice” is directly opposite Manfred’s meeting the Chamois Hunter. When the mountaineer sees the Poet, he finds a “spectral form” with “lightning eyes.” Even children when viewing the Poet would hide their faces and young girls would refer to him with “false names.” Nevertheless, the Poet continues to follow the veiled maiden over land and sea.

Before the Poet enters the boat near the shore, he sees a swan and comments:

And what am I that I should linger here,

With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
In the deaf air... (286-289)

The Poet seems to suggest that death might end mortal life, but an echo of existence continues in eternity. This brings the Poet hope. When he finally embarks and sets out to sea, an urge compels him to meet “lone Death.” He moves safely through caverns, dells, rivers, whirlpools, and other obstacles. At one point, the sights and smells of the woods tempt him to linger in a flowery glade, but the urge to proceed overwhelms him:

... The Poet longed
To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,
But on his heart its solitude returned,
And he forebode. (412-415)

The long, rich and often convoluted description of the Poet’s journey through nature can be representative of the Poet’s environment acting upon his mind. The Poet is safe in his boat, symbolizing his mind concentrating on eternity, as it moves through the elements surrounding it, which are often violent and uncertain. He is secure only while contemplating his idealized love. As the Poet moves deeper into nature’s bosom, the language reflects the Poet’s desire to die: “By love, or dream, or mightier Death, / He sought in Nature’s dearest haunt, some bank, / Her cradle, and his sepulcher” (428-430).

The Poet is searching for an idyllic place where he can rest his weary head. At this point, the description of nature becomes more dark and foreboding. The
Poet’s spirit is beginning to wane; he can feel death approaching. When the veiled maiden appears to stand beside him, she is “clothed in no bright robes / Of shadowy silver or enshrining light.” Further on, she is described as simply “two eyes... in the gloom of thought.” Her majesty has dissipated concurrently with the Poet’s mind, soul and body. As the intensity of the Poet dies, so does his vision.

He, however, is resolute and continues to follow the light that “shone within his soul.” At one point, the Poet’s own body, after extreme fatigue, seems to completely exhaust itself and the inspiration within him begins to wither as well:

A gradual change was here,
Yet, ghastly. For, as years flow away,
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin
And white, and where irradiate dewy eyes
Had shone, gleam stony orb. (532-536)

The Poet’s once radiant eyes have now transformed into “stony orbs,” signifying cold death. Almost at the end of his earthly journey, the Poet reaches a quiet pristine grove, where the “stillness of its solitude” is entirely undisturbed. Once again the moon becomes apparent; not a star is in the sky; everything is quiet. The vision is completely gone, save for “images of the majestic past,” lifeless memories of the veiled maiden. Finally, the Poet dies, and his last sight is the moon, which is similar to the ending of *Manfred*.

The Poet, unlike Manfred, chose a path and stubbornly followed it to its conclusion. Returning to Hoffman’s interpretation of Lockean ideas implicit in the text, it appears that the Poet internalized knowledge from the universe, which formed
his mind and experience to some degree; however, there came a time when his gaze turned inward to contemplate an image of pure, unadulterated beauty not extant in the corporeal world. Locke believed that, upon birth, our minds were blank slates that were written on and designed by our environment. Yet, in Alastor, the vision of the veiled maiden, a symbol of all the knowledge, truth, and virtue in the world, could not have been created from empirical reality. There was something original in the Poet’s mind that defied Locke’s theory, or at least unknowingly incorporated within it an element of Platonism.

With reference to Shelley’s comment that the poem is a situational allegory of the mind, this dichotomy of Platonic and Lockean philosophies creates a confusing paradox. Shelley could be presenting the Poet at different stages of his life as representing these two antithetical philosophies, as he demonstrates the inevitable results of each. Therefore, at the beginning when the Poet’s mind was completely formed by his surroundings, he searched only externally for truth. This, as shown, did not bring him satisfaction. However, at a certain point the Poet intuits and then follows a vision that arose from the depths of his soul. This option resulted in the Poet’s demise. Shelley’s conclusion could be that neither idealism nor materialism is the one exclusive epistemological theory, and that possibly a combination of the two would be the correct theoretical position.

Returning to the narrative, the internalized vision often came while the Poet was asleep. This is significant because sleep is a state of mind not directly controlled by the sensations from external sources. The realm of sleep is beyond the world of illusion, closer to eternity. This striving after the ideal forces the Poet to lose his
center of gravity. Albert Gerard states that this is effectuated by a melding of the ideal with the physical:

His self-centeredness, mentioned by Shelley in the Preface and exhibited in the Arab maiden episode, causes him to lose his psychological balance: he falls in love with the image of the ideal which has risen in his own mind, and so allows his sensitiveness to life and the external world to wither away. For the infinite cannot be enclosed in a finite form, the ideal cannot become an object for the senses and yet remain itself. (169)

When the Poet created or intellectualized his ideal form, he sought to meld with it completely, regardless of the consequences. This image provided him something to direct his course, which kept him intellectually and imaginatively separated from humanity, yet trapped inside a solipsistic universe that led to his destruction.
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