

Till like two meteors of expanding flame,  
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,  
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still  
 Burning, yet ever unconsumable:  
 In one another's substance finding food,  
 Like flames too pure and light and unimbued  
 To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,  
 Which point to Heaven and cannot pass away:  
 One hope within two wills, one will beneath  
 Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,  
 One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,  
 And one annihilation. Woe is me!  
 The wingèd words on which my soul would pierce  
 Into the height of Love's rare Universe,  
 Are chains of lead around its flight of fire—  
 I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

Love unites in act, not in essence. The countermyth demands union in essence, and so destroys the poem, in the movement to "one annihilation." The attempt both to extend and to realize the limits of relationship and expression fails, yet the poem remains. Four months later, in *Adonais* (June 1821), Shelley extended his chronicle of a quest's darkening. *Adonais* is an elegy on the death of John Keats, but also on the waning of Shelley's own quest.

### ADONAIS

Shelley and Keats, brought together by Leigh Hunt, failed to become friends. Hunt puts it briefly: "Keats did not take to Shelley as kindly as Shelley did to him." Still, they saw enough of one another in the spring of 1817 for Keats to fear the other poet's personal and literary influence upon *Endymion*, and they continued to see one another until Shelley left England for a last time in March 1818.

In July 1820 Shelley, knowing of Keats's illness, asked him to come to Italy, to avoid the English winter. The invitation was for Keats to take up his residence with the Shelleys. Yet the same generous letter contains criticism of Keats's poetry which he was not likely to accept. After praising *Endymion* for "the treasures of

poetry it contains," Shelley adds, "though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion." This becomes a more general censure: "In poetry I have sought to avoid system and mannerism. I wish those who excel me in genius would pursue the same plan."

Keats's reply was equally apt. "You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore." Each poet had hold of a limited critical truth about the other, but Keats, ill and irritated, understandably showed less graciousness in the exchange.

The poets did not meet again, for Keats came to Italy only to die, at Rome, on February 23, 1821. Shelley had, in the meantime, read the *Hyperion* fragment in Keats's volume of 1820 and thereby changed his estimate of Keats's poetry. "If the *Hyperion* be not grand poetry, none has been produced by our contemporaries." Shelley went to his own death with the rereading of Keats, evidently his last act. Trelawny, identifying his friend's body, catches this final and affecting detail:

The tall slight figure, the jacket, the volume of Sophocles in one pocket, and Keats's poems in the other, doubled back, as if the reader, in the act of reading, had hastily thrust it away . . .

Keats was only three months dead when Shelley composed his elegy. He said of the poem that it was "perhaps the least imperfect" of his compositions, and certainly it is a highly finished work. Responding to his friends' praise of it, he very truly observed: "The poet and the man are two different natures: though they exist together, they may be unconscious of each other, and incapable of deciding on each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act." We may apply this to the subject of *Adonais*; it is the formalized lament of Shelley the poet for Keats the poet. It has rather less to do with the very real but remote grief that Shelley felt for Keats as a man. As in Milton's *Lycidas*, the poet's concern is with the fate of poets in a world that resists their prophecies and a nature that seems indifferent to their destruction.

Shelley's form is the pastoral elegy, modeled on Bion's *Lament for Adonis* and Moschus' *Lament for Bion*, Hellenic poems of the second century B.C. Shelley had translated fragments of both

poems and turned to them as archetypes of the kind of elegy he wished to write. Bion laments the death of the vegetation god, Adonis, the doomed lover of Venus. Moschus adopts the form of his friend's poem as appropriate for lamenting Bion's death and so initiates the tradition of one poet associating the death of another poet with the fabled death of Adonis. Spenser's lament for Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel*, and Milton's for Edward King continue this tradition, which culminates in *Adonais*.

Shelley chooses to believe, for his poetic purposes, that Keats was slain by the attacks upon *Endymion*, particularly the one made in the *Quarterly Review*. What counts here is imaginative, rather than literal, correctness. Shelley means, as Northrop Frye observes, that the hatred of genius by mediocrity is a death principle in society.<sup>45</sup>

The epigraph to *Adonais* is a little poem attributed to Plato, which Shelley himself translated:

Thou wert the morning star among the living,  
Ere thy fair light had fled;—  
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving  
New splendour to the dead.

Keats has passed from the sphere of Lucifer, star of the morning, to that of Hesperus or Venus, first light of evening. This is a prefiguration of his fate within the poem.

*Adonais* consists of fifty-five Spenserian stanzas, and falls into two principal movements, with the thirty-eighth stanza marking the point of transition. The last seventeen stanzas are much finer than what precede them. Shelley casts off his poem's machinery in its final third and chants an astonishing hymn that recapitulates his darkened quest and seeks at last the quest's realization in a transvaluation of death. The movement of the first two thirds of the poem is much clearer than that of the final third, but is considerably less inspired.

Adonais, or Keats, is dead as the poem opens, and the Hour of death mourns him, and is to call the other hours to similar mourning. The dead poet was the youngest and dearest son of the Muse Urania, patroness of his poems *Endymion* and *Hyperion*, who was slumbering in her paradise when the murder occurred. She is called upon to weep, and yet her lament will be in vain. The poet's crea-

tions lament with her. The poem's first crisis comes in the counterpoint between the rebirth of nature and the soul's failure to revive:

Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,  
 But grief returns with the revolving year;  
 The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;  
 The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear;  
 Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Seasons' bier;  
 The amorous birds now pair in every brake,  
 And build their mossy homes in field and brere;  
 And the green lizard, and the golden snake,  
 Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean  
 A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst  
 As it has ever done, with change and motion,  
 From the great morning of the world when first  
 God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed,  
 The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;  
 All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;  
 Diffuse themselves; and spend in love's delight,  
 The beauty and the joy of their renewed might.

The leprous corpse, touched by this spirit tender,  
 Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;  
 Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour  
 Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death  
 And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;  
 Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows  
 Be as a sword consumed before the sheath  
 By sightless lightning?—the intense atom glows  
 A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose.

This is a first and relatively crude formulation of the poem's greatest concern; the shaping spirit alone vanishes, while everything grosser turns over and reappears in cycle. This grief becomes that of Urania when she seeks her son's death chamber. She desires to join him in death, but she is "chained to Time, and cannot thence depart." After her lament, she is joined by the Mountain Shep-

herds, the surviving poets, including Byron, Thomas Moore, and Leigh Hunt, only the last of whom, in fact, cared for Keats. Once again, Shelley deliberately ignores the poets as men, and emphasizes only their symbolic aspect. Amid the others, comes Shelley himself:

A pardlike Spirit beautiful and swift—  
 A Love in desolation masked;—a Power  
 Girt round with weakness;—it can scarce uplift  
 The weight of the superincumbent hour;  
 It is a dying lamp, a falling shower,  
 A breaking billow;—even whilst we speak  
 Is it not broken? On the withering flower  
 The killing sun smiles brightly: on a cheek  
 The life can burn in blood, even while the heart may break.

In his other stanzas of self-description here, Shelley compares himself to Actaeon, Cain, and Christ. Like Actaeon, he has "gazed on Nature's naked loveliness," and Nature strikes back by turning his own thoughts upon him, as Actaeon was pursued by his own hounds. Like Cain, he has perhaps failed to be his brother's keeper, though he had tried to preserve and shelter Keats. Again, like Cain, he is in fact an outcast from his family's and nation's society, for he is more reviled in orthodox English circles than Keats or Byron or any other contemporary writer. The Christ comparison is frankly impious; Shelley means to parallel his sufferings for mankind with those of Christ, for he desires to make his own sufferings vicarious, though not an atonement. In the stanza just quoted he compares his own power to the mutable strength of natural process, caught at the moment of its downward passage, "a falling shower, a breaking billow." Like the confronted reality of Asia or Emilia, his power can scarcely be apprehended before it wavers and vanishes. He has caught for us, imperishably, the basis of his style, its deliberate evanescence, and has given us its thematic justification: to be true to what *he* observes as most vital in nature.

Renewed lament for Adonais is followed by the poorest stanza in the poem (XXXVII) in which the Quarterly Reviewer is castigated as a "noteless blot on a remembered name." From this bathos the next stanza recoils, and the poem soars into greatness:

Nor let us weep that our delight is fled  
 Far from these carrion kites that scream below;  
 He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;  
 Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now.—  
 Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
 Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
 A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
 Through time and change, unquenchably the same,  
 Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame.

Shelley remains agnostic as to literal immortality; Keats "wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead," and survives only as they survive. But though he agrees with Ecclesiastes on "dust to the dust," he affirms the return of creative spirit back to a source neither temporal nor mutable, "the burning fountain" where life-giving water is aflame with the energy of imagination. In the light of that fountain, the dead poet is neither dead nor asleep, but "awakened from the dream of life" by having "outsoared the shadow of our night." Urania is represented in the heavens by Venus, the star of evening, to whose sphere Keats has soared. As the shadow of earth stops at the sphere of Venus, the poet is now free "from the contagion of the world's slow stain," and becomes a presence of transcendent Nature:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
 His voice in all her music, from the moan  
 Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;  
 He is a presence to be felt and known  
 In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,  
 Spreading itself where'er that Power may move  
 Which has withdrawn his being to its own;  
 Which wields the world with never-wearied love,  
 Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

There is a touch of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* here. More vital, Shelley moves in this stanza to his most overt affirmation of the benevolence of the unknown Power he has pursued since *Alastor*. The Power is withdrawn, and has taken Keats into that remote tranquillity, but it still dominates and directs the world with love, by both giving reality a firm existence at a phenomenal level and kindling the spirit rising out of phenomena:

He is a portion of the loveliness  
 Which once he made more lovely; he doth bear  
 His part, while the one Spirit's plastic stress  
 Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there,  
 All new successions to the forms they wear;  
 Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight  
 To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;  
 And bursting in its beauty and its might  
 From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

This majestic stanza completes one aspect of Shelley's imaginative apprehension of reality. The Spirit itself now directs the successions of mutable appearances, as part of its ultimate desire to mold the world into its own likeness. The unwilling dross of things resists, but finally in vain, as the Spirit bursts triumphantly through the forms of nature and man up into the light of Heaven. Until the Spirit kindles itself for a last time in the final four stanzas, this is all that Shelley is willing to put in terms of a faith.

Keats, like Chatterton or Sidney, is one of "the splendours of the firmament of time," and he goes now to join them, the Vesper of their throng. But Shelley's thought returns to groundling earth, where he himself still abides. As he ponders the problem of earthly consolation, his mind turns to Rome, scene of Keats's death and burial, and to the Protestant cemetery where lie the remains of Keats, and where he himself was to lie not so long after. Though the Spirit's breath moves, the world's wind remains bitter:

From the world's bitter wind  
 Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.  
 What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

This is the poem's great moment of transition, its dialectical resolution as Shelley chooses the fate of Keats for himself. In a stanza justly celebrated two opposing realities are brought together, with neither negating the other:

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
 Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
 Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,

If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!  
 Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,  
 Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
 The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.

Though life *stains* the white radiance of Eternity, the staining is not all loss, for the dome produces the colors that Eternity merely subsumes. Death smashes the dome and tramples it into fragments, but the fragments are at least brightly colored, for they are identical with the azure sky, with flowers, ruins, statues, music, and the words of Shelley's own poem. Yet he turns from them and seeks the deathly glory they transfuse:

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?  
 Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here  
 They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!  
 A light is passed from the revolving year,  
 And man, and woman; and what still is dear  
 Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.  
 The soft sky smiles,—the low wind whispers near:  
 'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,

No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

The low wind that rises here is like the west wind of Shelley's *Ode*, the creative and destructive agent, which begins by destroying. The year revolves again, yet a light has passed away from it forever, and everything left behind is caught in the strife of contraries, "attracts to crush." For a last time Shelley states his now pragmatically hopeless faith:

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,  
 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse  
 Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
 Which through the web of being blindly wove  
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of  
 The fire for which all thirst; now beams on me,  
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

In this straining upward, the natural world that is given to us becomes only a darkness, into which we are born by an eclipsing



Curse, and within which we weave our sustaining web of Love quite blindly. This is the undersong of the Spirit's immense declaration, for the overt emphasis here is on the salvation that brings us finally back to the burning fountain. The poem now refers us back to the *Ode to the West Wind*, as the force invoked there now descends on its prophet:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
 Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven  
 Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
 The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!  
 I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;  
 Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
 The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

We mistake this triumph of rhetoric if we read it as other than a triumph of human despair. The imagination holding life open to death is not the burden of this great but suicidal stanza. Shelley is surrendering to Heaven, though it is the Heaven not of any orthodoxy but of his own agnostic will. A known is yielding to an unknown, and a vision collapses into mystery. *Adonais* is an imperishable poem, but it is also the sepulcher of a humanist and heroic quest.

## 7. Transmemberment of Song:

### FINAL LYRICS

Shelley died at sea, off Leghorn, on July 8, 1822, a month before what would have been his thirtieth birthday. The lyrics of his final half-year of life have both perfection of form and a melancholy serenity of tone. *The Zucca* is a darker recasting of the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, as it concerns the departure of that Spirit:

By Heaven and Earth, from all whose shapes thou flowest,  
 Neither to be contained, delayed, nor hidden;  
 Making divine the loftiest and the lowest,  
 When for a moment thou art not forbidden