

# Thematic Analysis of “Adonais”

Written and published on October 4, 1821, “Adonais” memorializes the death of Shelley’s friend and fellow poet John Keats, whom he regarded as being one of the poets of “the highest genius” of the age. Keats died in Rome on February 23, 1821, at the age of twenty-six. A medical doctor by training, Keats knew for some time that he was seriously ill. Indeed, on the evening of February 3, 1820, he had coughed up blood and knew he had no choice but to face the inevitable. “I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die.”

Despite the actual circumstances of Keats’s demise, Shelley chose to construct an elaborate myth, based partly on Greek mythology and partly on the literary “politics” of his day, specifically blaming his friend’s death on a scathing review of Keats’s poem “Endymion” in the April issue of the 1818 *Quarterly Review*, written by a then anonymous critic (since identified as John Wilson Croker). Shelley is referring to this literary critic when he speaks of the devastating effect of his review on his beloved and sensitive friend as “the curse of Cain / Light on his head who pierced thy innocent breast, / And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest!” Shelley’s tirade, both within the preface, where he states that “these wretched men know not what they do,” and throughout the poem, cost Shelley his already tentative relationship with *Blackwood’s* magazine. But in terms of the poem, Shelley’s weaving together of a contemporary situation with the primarily classical depiction of Adonis makes the work still more complex. To do this, Shelley employs two very important Greek myths in this poem.

The predominant one is the myth of Adonis (whose name also means “Lord”), in which Adonis is born from a myrrh tree, dies in a hunting accident where he is slain by a boar, and then is metamorphosed into an anemone, a flower without scent. In Shelley’s poem, Adonais is killed by an evil critic, depicted as a wild beast who “pierced by the shaft which flies / In darkness” and is mourned by his mother Urania (Aphrodite/Urania, the goddess of earthly love), whom Shelley elevates to the status of motherhood, thereby invalidating another mythic tradition which has Aphrodite

as Adonis's lover. Shelley did this in order to conform to the dignity of a poem written to commemorate the death of a great poet.

The second though less obvious myth concerns the story of Echo and Narcissus, which is most fully preserved by the Latin poet Ovid. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Echo was a nymph who fell in love with Narcissus. Echo was punished by Hera, the wife of Zeus, for trying to distract Hera from recognizing Zeus's amorous dalliance with the other nymphs. She is punished by Hera for misusing the gift of speech for deceitful purposes and is transformed into stone; most cruelly, she can never again utter a single word or thought of her own. She is left with only the ability to echo someone else's words. In short, Echo is guilty of rhetorical violence, which bears a striking similarity to the violence wrought by the pen of Keats's reviewer. Echo also fell in love with Narcissus, a beautiful young boy who loved no one until, while gazing upon the calm surface of a lake, he fell in love with his own reflected image. This self-consuming love became deadly, for he was prohibited from ever knowing or loving another person. Though Echo would call out to him, he would never be aware of her. Narcissus was eventually metamorphosed into a beautiful white flower, an image repeated in "Adonais." The two lovers were doomed to never know each other.

Finally, "Adonais" is also a part of the classical tradition in that it is structured along the lines of the classical elegy, a type of poem inspired by the death of an important person. Although there were variations within the genre, the elegy contained certain standard structural parts:

- a ceremonial mourning for an exemplary person;
- a mournful invocation to a muse;
- a sympathetic participation of nature, who shares the mourners' grief;
- a description of the procession of appropriate mourners;
- a denunciation of unworthy participants who are found wanting in their literary achievements;
- a song of lament for the person's death;
- praise for the lost one's virtues;
- and a consolation or turning point for the poet, and for all those who share his grief, from the despair of terrible loss to hope for a far better life in heaven.

The elegy has also been used for political purposes, which is relevant to Shelley's belief that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of their time."

**Stanza 1** begins in total despair: "I weep for Adonais—he is dead!" This hopelessness will eventually be worked out in the process of the poem. Indeed, "Adonais" is what modern psychology would call "a work of mourning" in which the bereaved person goes through a catalogue of associations with the deceased and gradually accepts their absence by turning those associations into cherished memories that live on forever. Moreover, the "echoing" device, or repetition of the same phrase, "O, weep for Adonais!" that exists throughout the poem is symptomatic of the early stages of mourning.

This stanza also contains another classical device known as the "personification of the hours," in which Time is addressed as an essential living entity that marks both the passage of time and the change of seasons. Here, Time is even further particularized into the appropriate "Hour" that establishes a sympathetic rapport and becomes a trusted companion of the bereaved poet who has presided over the death of Adonais: "And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years / To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers / And teach them thine own sorrow."

In **Stanza 2** we find the classical invocation, a request for assistance, addressed to the Muses, goddesses upon whom poets depend for the inspiration needed to create their poetry. Here, that goddess is Urania, and the invocation is not only a plea for a response, but an accusation as well. The poet is angry at Urania's absence, believing that her intervention would have prevented Adonais's death. "Where wert thou might Mother, when he lay, / When thy Son lay, pierced by the shaft . . . where was lorn Urania / When Adonais died?" Shelley considers her to be negligent in her duties, ignoring her son's desperate plight. "She sate, while one, with soft enamoured breath, / Rekindled all the fading melodies, / With which, like flowers that mock the corpse beneath." Indeed, Urania is vaguely implicated in the myth of Narcissus, for she too remained unresponsive to her son's echoing voice. In **Stanza 3**, Shelley must call out to her to attend to her sacred duties for she has not yet acknowledged the tragedy that has taken place. "Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep! / . . . For he is gone, where all things wise and fair / Descend;—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep / Will yet restore him to the vital air." She is being summoned to a

terrible and unrelieved anguish. "Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair."

**Stanza 6** not only continues the implication of Urania, reminding the neglectful mother of the enormity of her loss, but expands it even further to include images of the shattered dreams and lost potential of her young son who now lives merely as a white flower on the surface of a lake. "But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished— / The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew, / Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished . . . Thy extreme hope, the loveliest and the last . . . Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste; The broken lily lies—" That lost potential for even greater artistic achievement is intensified later in **Stanza 9**, as we are given a brief catalog of the fruits of his poetic imagination, with Shelley making reference to such pastoral poems as Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and the mythological beings that are painted upon its surface. "O, weep for Adonais!—The quick Dreams, / The passion-winged Ministers of thought, Who were his flocks . . . and whom he taught / The love which was its music, wander not,—Wander no more, from kindling brain to brain, / But droop there."

In **Stanzas 14 through 17** we see Nature in sympathetic bond with Shelley's grief, for Nature recognizes that Keats loved her; the elements must respond to the terrible loss of their loving representative. "All he had loved, and moulded into thought, / From shape, and hue, and odour, and sweet sound, / Lamented Adonais . . . Pale Ocean in unquiet slumber lay, / And the wild winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay." Even Echo is resurrected in Stanza 15 from her "deathlike" state, only to a more heightened experience of her awful pain, for she can no longer even echo another person's thoughts. "Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains, / . . . And will no more reply to winds or fountains, / . . . Since she can mimic not his lips, more dear / Than those for whose disdain she pined away." And so the list continues, with Keats's poems coming to life to add their plaintive voices, a truly "unspeakable" agony that finally outdoes that of Echo and Narcissus. "Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down / Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were . . . since her delight is flown / . . . Nor to himself Narcissus, as to both / Thou Adonais."

In Stanza 17, the focus shifts to a denunciation of the unworthy literary practitioner, the anonymous, evil critic, who is to be forever

punished for his contribution to “rhetorical violence.” More significant, this is contextualized in a far more emphatic way: “As Albion wails for thee: the curse of Cain / Light on his head who pierced thy innocent breast, / And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest.” Two things are important here. First, in using the name Albion, Shelley now invokes the entire English nation, as Albion is an older name for England. Second, in comparing the reviewer to Cain, the stakes become much higher and far more realistic than any mythology; the biblical analogue also gives a sacred dimension to Keats’s very being. Yet, that angelic soul has not yet been reunited with Cain’s body, for it is frightened by his murderous deed. His sin lives on and holds him in captivity, and in the absence of a reunion of body with the soul, he can find no transcendental resolution to his predicament. This unrealized reunion, which would enable the deceased to break out of the shackles of his earthly bondage and live in total happiness in the next world, is especially poignant in lines reminiscent of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.”

**Stanzas 18–21** are Shelley’s personal expression of grief for the loss of his friend. When he exclaims, “Ah woe is me! Winter is come and gone, / But grief returns with the revolving year,” we are struck by the sense of hopelessness in the last lines of Shelley’s great ode. We find no spiritual renewal at this point in his elegy. Shelley is overwhelmed with abject despair, and his feelings of grief are contrasted with a regenerated natural world: “Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean / A quickening life from the Earth’s heart has burst . . . they illumine death . . . [for] Nought we know, dies.” And, finally, in **stanzas 22–29**, this mortal agony finally touches Adonais’s mother Urania, causing her to accept the terrible tragedy that has taken place. At last she participates in the mourning process that until now she has evaded. “Swift as a Thought by the snake Memory stung, / From her ambrosial rest the fading Splendour sprung. / . . . so swept her on her way / Even to the mournful place where Adonais lay.” This mythic being even enters into Shelley’s myth of death-dealing reviewers, fiendishly depicted as “the herded wolves . . . the obscene ravens, clamorous o’er the dead; The vultures to the conqueror’s banner.” In denouncing them, he invokes the image of the poet Byron who wrote a satirical poem against these very same offending critics, entitled “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” (1809). Byron’s mythological analogue is Apollo, “[t]he Pythian of the age,” the champion who killed the dragon Python.

In **stanzas 30–35**, Shelley turns his attention to a procession of mourners, “the mountain shepherds.” In the context of “Adonais,” these poetic practitioners are worthy of esteem, and preeminent among them is the poet Byron: “The Pilgrim of Eternity, whose fame / Over his living head like Heaven is bent.” This is a reference to Byron’s poem, “Childe Harold,” concerning a young and eloquent noble of the same name who travels through a wasteland, “a place of agony and strife,” like one outcast (similar to Shelley), an “outlaw of his own dark mind.”

Finally, however, the unmitigated grief that has thus far dominated the poem begins to lighten. We find cause for new hope as the poet radically shifts from mourning to a denial of death’s ultimate victory. The poet finds consolation for this terrible loss, and that consolation is likewise a process. In **stanza 38**, Keats becomes one of the “enduring dead,” because his spirit lives on and returns, “[b]ack to the burning fountain whence it came,” with the same creative powers it manifested in its mortal lifetime. The denial of death goes even further, as Shelley declares that Keats’s death has been but a dream from which he now awakens. Even more boldly, he asserts that we the living are the ones who are asleep, and thus we are the ones who must strive against unknown fears and demons. “Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep— / He hath awakened from the dream of life— / ’Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep / With the phantoms an unprofitable strife.” Keats, having “outsoared the shadow of our night,” has far surpassed and out-distanced the narrow circumference of our own lives that are filled with unrest and the fear of growing old. We are directed to stop grieving, for “[h]e lives, he wakes—’tis Death is dead, not he; / Mourn not for Adonais.” Adonais no longer needs Nature’s sympathy, for one of his poetic genius and sensitivity has earned his reward.

Having celebrated so poignantly Nature’s eternal promise of youth and vitality, Keats is now one with Nature, rejoicing in his own immortality. “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.” So thorough is the transformation of mourning into joyous celebration that Shelley ultimately looks on his death as the promise of reunion with his beloved friend. “Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart? . . . ’Tis Adonis calls! oh, hasten thither, / No more let Life divide what Death can join together.” ❀

# Critical Views on “Adonais”

## NEIL ARDITI ON THE POEM AS A RESPONSE TO KEATS'S CRITICS

[Neil Arditì is the author of “Shelley’s ‘Adonais’ and the Literary Canon.” In the excerpt below from his article, Arditì discusses Shelley’s poem as a response to the critics of John Keats, expressing a hope that the conservative literary tradition will be open to reforming itself.]

To appreciate fully the impact of the death of John Keats on Shelley’s ideas about canon formation requires a considerable act of the imagination. The reputation of Keats is now established; it no longer shocks anyone to speak of him in the same breath as Milton. But the shock would have been substantial to any contemporary reader of Shelley’s elegy for Keats, “Adonais.” As Kenneth Neill Cameron points out, Shelley’s placement of Keats in the company of Homer, Dante, and Milton “would have seemed ridiculous, indeed an insult and a challenge, to conservative critics; and even to the most liberal ones it would have seemed greatly exaggerated.”

Shelley’s desire to challenge conservative critics of Keats and his own poetry is related to his conviction that Keats was killed by a negative review of *Endymion*. That conviction has been frequently derided, most notably by Lord Byron (“’Tis strange the mind, that fiery particle,/Should let itself be snuff’d out by an article”). But what matters more than Shelley’s literalization of his own myth of Keats’s death is the myth itself, which should be read as a parable of the vicissitudes of the canonical. (. . .)

In “Adonais,” Shelley considers the reaction of *The Quarterly Review* to Keats’s poetry in a similar light. Although John Wilson Croker’s infamous attack on Keats’s *Endymion* spends much of its time mocking the poet’s craftsmanship, the critic’s foremost objection is bluntly put forward in the second paragraph of his review: Keats “is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry.” In other words, Keats was a member of the middle class with liberal sympathies and radical friends like Leigh Hunt. The idea of such a figure striving for

canonicity struck Croker as absurd, for he accepted the canonical authority of Eton and Harrow, of Oxford and Cambridge, of the Church of England and the Tory party, and of *The Quarterly Review* itself, which was the literary mouthpiece of the conservative establishment. (. . .)

“Adonais” does not despair of the capacity of literary tradition to renew itself, although it perhaps despairs of everything else. In *The English Elegy*, Peter Sacks movingly associates the suicidal drive in “Adonais” with a refusal of the consolations of elegy, an unwillingness to invest value in the compensatory mediations of figurative language. Indeed, beneath the carefully wrought surfaces of Shelley’s poem lies an uncompromising will—an impulse to overleap all bounds. I would hasten to add, however, that this impulse, which mounts throughout the final third of the poem, is inseparable from Shelley’s enormous investment in the moment Eliot minimizes: the moment in which a new work opens up the canon. That moment is, technically speaking, posthumous, and Shelley rushes towards it in the apocalyptic finale of “Adonais.” One is reminded of the fifth and final section of “Ode to the West Wind,” to which Shelley directly alludes at the opening of his last stanza:

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 . . .

Sacks observes that Shelley’s conclusion is “profoundly disturbing,” particularly when we remember, as we must, that Shelley died a year later at sea, “refusing to follow a passing crew’s advice to strike his sail during the storm.” Others, like Earl Wasserman and Stuart Curran, have stressed the triumphant tone of the poem, precisely where it seems most suicidal. This paradox, in both “Ode to the West Wind” and “Adonais,” is related to the phenomenon of self-canonization. One feels as if the author were dying into eternal life, or not dying at all, but being translated directly, like Enoch and Elijah, into a lasting presence.

What is disclosed at the moment of canonization? Nothing less, for Shelley, than the poetic nature of reality. By opening the canon to fresh revelation, a new poet disrupts the established order, recreating the past in his or her own image. What we took for granted, what we considered natural, necessary, realistic, traditional, authoritative,





language. Though elegies may weep, they must do so formally. They may not “break up their lines to weep” within that weeping.

In what follows, I shall try to go beyond a description of the form of “Adonais” to suggest how the pattern of its language relates to psychological and philosophical currents running deep within the poem. My questions include the following: What and how does Shelley mourn? How does he revise the inherited fictions of elegy? What is his relation to Urania? How does his narcissism affect the work of mourning? (This relation between narcissism and mourning, so carefully stressed by Freud, is noticeable in English elegies since the time of Spenser, and is of great importance to “Adonais.”) What are the implications of the poem’s extraordinary ending, and how does it relate to Shelley’s ambivalence toward figurative language? Finally, how does this ambivalence, directed against the very fabric of the poem, relate specifically to the predicament of a mourner?

“Adonais” has two epigraphs. The first is a Greek couplet ascribed to Plato in the *Greek Anthology*. Following the common misattribution of the couplet to Plato the philosopher, Shelley translated these lines:

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.

Besides drawing attention to the stellar imagery of consolation, Shelley’s choice of the epigraph indicates his desire to believe in a poetry somehow compatible with Platonic thought. (. . .)

The second epigraph quotes the lines in Moschus’s elegy for Bion, referring to the poet’s having been poisoned by some insensitive scorners of verse. Shelley will return to this in stanza 36, elaborating his theory about Keats’s death. While stressing the accusation’s relevance to the poem, the epigraph foregrounds Shelley’s debt to the Alexandrian elegy at large. The debt is immediately apparent in the opening line, which reads almost as a translation of Bion’s lament for Adonis:

I weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
O weep for Adonais! though our tears

Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!  
And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years  
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,  
And teach them thine own sorrow, say: "With me  
Died Adonais; till the Future dares  
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be  
An echo and a light unto eternity!"

The first difference from Bion is of course the name Adonais, blending those of the vegetation deity, Adonis, and the Judaic Adonai. As historians of religion have shown, the originally physical significance of the fertility gods was allegorized and spiritualized by successive cults; and elegists, too, have continually revised the meaning of this most crucial figure of the genre. It is especially intriguing to note how Shelley has conserved the original figure within the new, for the poem itself unfolds the very *process* of resignification, moving from natural, sexual referents, towards their spiritualized successors. Shelley's act of renaming neatly suggests his intention to use and yet alter the inherited elegiac tradition: to use its essential strategy of assimilating the deceased to a figure of immortality, while redefining the meaning of that figure.

A second difference declares itself at once: unlike Bion, Shelley turns immediately to question the efficacy of weeping. By so doing, he begins a long interrogation of conventional gestures and figures of mourning. This oddly skeptical employment of conventions marks this poem as a true heir of "Lycidas" and "Astrophel," whose obsessions with "false surmise" and "verses vaine" had driven them to carefully persuasive consolations. As our reference to the "Plato" epigraph hinted, and as the poem will in fact show, Shelley's struggle with his legacy and with his very medium itself is particularly vexed. We can perhaps see this in the unusual prematurity with which he initiates the self-questioning or self-qualifying mode. Spenser had at least gathered momentum before examining the vanity of verse. And although Milton did begin with a self-doubting admission of sour immaturity, he at least did not suspect the "meed of some melodious tear."

Shelley's struggle to begin his work of mourning is further apparent in his deliberate *delegation* of such work to various figures throughout the opening sections of the poem. In fact it is not until quite far into the poem that Shelley moves beyond these delegate-mourners to assume a more personal voice. The delegates have at

least two functions: they are all inadequate mourners, allowing Shelley to criticize them and to distance himself from various forms of unsuccessful grieving; and yet they keep his poem in motion, giving it the processional character of traditional elegies, allowing it to achieve the self-purifying and self-surpassing ceremonies so important to the work of mourning.

—Peter Sacks, “Last Clouds: A Reading of ‘Adonais,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1984): pp. 379–82.



### JAMES A. W. HEFFERNAN ON THE MYTH OF KEATS'S DEATH

[James A. W. Heffernan is the author of *The Re-Creation of Landscape: A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable and Turner* (1984) and *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993). In the excerpt below from his article, “Adonais: Shelley’s Consumption of Keats,” Heffernan discusses the myth of Keats’s death upon which the poem is premised, a myth, Heffernan contends, which Shelley himself created in part as a way of projecting his own fears onto the other poet.]

*Adonais* is remarkable not simply because it at once reflects and transforms the whole tradition of pastoral elegy from Moschus and Bion to Spenser and Milton, but also because its point of departure is a singularly strange story about the cause of Keats’s death. No one now believes this story, but critics normally assume that Shelley did, that he simply took into his poem what had been given to him as a fact. The story that Keats’s death was precipitated by a harsh review of *Endymion* provides, says Ross Woodman, the “literal or historical level” on which Shelley builds his visionary poem. But when the “literal or historical level” is itself a piece of fiction, it should be much more thoroughly examined than it has been up to now. Careful scrutiny will show that Shelley himself invented the strange story of Keats’s death. It will also allow us to see that in generating *Adonais* from that story, Shelley consumes as well as re-creates the personality of Keats.

The difficulty of isolating that personality from Shelley's version of it—or vision of it—is illustrated by Earl Wasserman's observation that "the skeletal form of the Adonis legend provided a nearly exact means of translating Keats's biography into a conceptual pattern." In one sense Wasserman is right. The story of a promising young poet slain by the malice of critics could be readily translated into the story of the youthful Adonis slain by an evil beast. But when Wasserman speaks of the poem as a translation of Keats's "biography," to what biography does he refer? In the spring of 1821, when Shelley wrote *Adonais*, there was none worthy of the name. There were merely a few facts and a number of rumors, and it was Shelley himself who created the most notorious rumor of all. Careful examination of the evidence will reveal that, beyond any reasonable doubt, the strange story of Keats's assassination is merely the first of the fictions with which Shelley deliberately consumed the facts of Keats's life.

This particular fiction was based on a purely second-hand knowledge of Keats's last years. The last that Shelley ever saw of Keats was in the winter of 1818, three years before his death. In July 1820, when Shelley was in Pisa, a letter from John Gisborne brought him news that Keats had burst a blood vessel and was seriously ill with consumption. When Shelley then wrote solicitously to Keats and invited him to come to Pisa, Keats sent his thanks, but indicated that he might not be able to come, and in fact never did come, going instead to Rome, where he died on February 23, 1821. In place of himself he asked John and Maria Gisborne to bring Shelley his words: a letter and the newly published volume of his poems—*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*. Yet it was not from Keats's words that Shelley constructed his version of Keats's ending. On the one hand, with no authorization from Keats, the publishers' "Advertisement" to the new volume apologized for the unfinished state of *Hyperion* by saying that "the reception given to [*Endymion*] discouraged the author from proceeding." On the other hand, Gisborne's letter told Shelley that Keats had burst a blood vessel. After Keats's death, this piece of information gave Shelley the means to literalize the metaphor merely implied by the "Advertisement": the criticism of *Endymion* had killed not merely Keats's ambition, but Keats himself. (. . .)

Even before *Adonais* was published, Byron saw that Shelley's story about Keats—if true—showed him to be little more than a feckless

narcissist: a man of “inordinate self-love” and without, Byron clearly implies, “powers of *resistance*.” The crucial question raised by the Preface to *Adonais*, then, is why Shelley paints this picture: why does he slander Keats in the very act of seeking to defend him against slander? (. . .)

Shelley also wished to project onto Keats the vulnerability he felt in himself, and thus to resolve the profound ambivalence with which he regarded the delicacy of his own idealism. The ambivalence is evident in poems such as “Ode to the West Wind,” where the speaker represents himself as both the pathetically fragile victim of a crucifying world (“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”) and as the resounding voice of a “Spirit fierce,” a spirit “tameless, and swift, and proud.” In *Adonais* itself, Shelley presents himself among the mourners as a “frail Form,” a dying lamp, a falling shower, a breaking billow, a bacchant holding the thyrsus with a weak and shaking hand, and a stricken deer—in short, as “a Power / Girt round with weakness.” Yet as Ross Woodman has recently argued, this picture of helpless vulnerability is not so much an idealized self-portrait as the parody of a posture which Shelley seeks to shed. (. . .)

From the weeping of the first stanza to the lowering wind of the last one, the inexorable flow of the poem has carried its subject, its speaker, and even itself to the brink of annihilation. Up to the very last word, the present tense verbs of the final stanza signify passing and imminent absence rather than presence: the breath descends; I am driven; I am borne; the soul beacons. Yet even as the *I* who writes helplessly transcribes the imminence of its own passing, the eye of the *I* foresees its transformation into something eternally individuated and eternally present, as fixed as existential prediction can make it. An abode where the eternal *are* is a place where Keats and Shelley may individually co-exist—so long as the words which signify that abode remain alive and unconsumed.

—James A. W. Heffernan, “*Adonais*: Shelley’s Consumption of Keats,”  
*Studies in Romanticism* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1984): pp. 295–97, 301, 302,  
315.



## DANIEL WILSON ON THE POET AS AMATEUR DIRECTOR AND THE READER AS SPECTATOR AND ACTOR

[In the excerpt below Daniel Wilson argues that the poem is not an elegy but rather conforms to Shelley's definition of drama in his *Defence of Poetry*. Wilson locates *Adonais*'s true generic identity as a play in which the poet functions as an amateur director and the reader assumes the dual part of spectator and actor.]

Traditionally, Shelley's *Adonais* has been identified as a sustained lyric in which a single, unitary voice identifiable as Shelley's moves through lament to consolation and beckons towards some sort of lyric transcendence through the dissolution of identity in the final stanza. I would contend that *Adonais* more closely corresponds to Shelley's description of drama in the *Defence of Poetry* and therefore is better understood as a dramatic lyric. As such, the poem mediates tensions between historical specificity and the impulse towards lyric transcendence which destabilize the conception of the poem as a monologic unity. The poem is literally a *play* of voices which enacts Shelley's desire for lyric transcendence and poetic acceptance in a self-reflexive dramatic lyric that functions according to Shelley's conception of the best drama. In the *Defence* Shelley describes drama that "continues to express poetry" as "a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects." These tensions, and the dialogizing effect of fragmenting the authorial subject within a self-drama, posit the final totalizing identity not inside the poem, but outside, as an auteur directing a play. The reader is consequently involved as both spectator and actor in the play of identity. [I invoke the image of the cinematic auteur for a number of reasons. First, as a directorial model it is appropriate to the conception of *Adonais* as a drama. Secondly, it is a figure which at once acknowledges the authorial function as an overdetermined, "already written" legal and economic entity, and yet allows for a subjective agency—Andrew Sarris embarrassingly called it the "*élan* of the soul"—which manipulates the preexisting available resources and limitations of both industry and genre in order to impress vision and meaning on exterior form.]

This tension between the historical and lyric impulses is inscribed in the very title and sub-title. The counterpointing between *Adonais* and *An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, Author of Endymion, Hyperion, Etc.* at once calls attention to the historical specificity of the poem and its desire for lyric transcendence. The subtitle and the narrative voice in the preface foreground the “time, place, circumstance, cause and effect” of the poem and pre(in)scribe its referents by asking the reader to identify Adonais as John Keats and the principal voices of lament and consolation in the poem as the single, evolving voice of Shelley. Such identification invites the reader to identify *with* Shelley’s grief and outrage at Keats’s death at the hands of the critic in the *Quarterly Review*. Conversely, the title and the elegiac conventions of the poem function to remove the utterance from the historical circumstances of its composition and from the occasion for Shelley’s personal grief by trying to universalize that grief, turning it into one of the “unchangeable forms of human nature.” These conventions and the designation of “elegy” in the subtitle further jeopardize the reader’s identification with Shelley’s grief, either real or idealized, by asserting the poem’s status as what Shelley calls “a highly wrought *piece of art*.” To assert the aestheticization of the utterance is to proclaim the artifice of the elegiac voices, destabilize the readers’ identification of the historical Shelley with those voices, and undermine our acceptance of or identification with the effusions of grief and transcendence in the lament and consolation. We are forced to see in Shelley’s poem the same difficulties Samuel Johnson saw in Milton’s *Lycidas*: it mixes the “trifling fictions” of convention with the “sacred truths” of lyric and makes us suspect that “where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief.”

We may also resist identifying the lyric voices in the poem as Shelley’s when we consider his narrative manipulations in the preface. There he asserts that he is “an impartial judge” of Keats’s poetry and yet asserts his bias that Keats was “among the writers of the highest genius” to adorn the age. But both concepts of partiality and impartiality are integral to the text. Shelley must announce his partiality in order to justify and lend an historical referent to the lament: indeed the lament and the poem itself are a *de facto* admission of partiality. But his assumption of an impartial role in the preface is an important rhetorical strategy that allows Shelley to valorize his own critical perception at the expense of the



“savage criticism” of the “wretched men” who write for the *Quarterly Review*. More precisely, it is a strategy that allows Shelley to create the illusion of difference between his evaluation and that expressed in the *Quarterly Review* and enables him to create the narration of Keats’s death that becomes the fictitious “historical” pretext of the poem.

In “*Adonais*: Shelley’s Consumption of Keats,” James Heffernan traced the evolution of Shelley’s fabrication of the apocryphal story of Keats’s death. He argues that the narrative of Keats’s death and the consequential figuring of Keats as a weak young flower blighted by such an insubstantial frost allows Shelley to “consume Keats in a myth of his own making.” Quite frankly, Shelley fakes the circumstances of Keats’s death so he can stage the scenes of his own equally faked outrage and grief. Keats’s corpse becomes a prop around which Shelley demonstrates his own poetic power. If Heffernan’s argument is correct—he builds a very convincing case—then the lyricism of the poem does not have *real* personal and historical referents, but instead signifies only its own enactment on the stage of referentiality. The poem thus is not an expression of grief or desire for lyric transcendence but a *performance* of poetical skill.

—Daniel Wilson, “Applaud the Deed”: The Theatre of Lyricism in Shelley’s *Adonais*,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1994): pp. 10–11.



## MARTHA BANTA ON OCCULT IMAGERY

[Martha Banta is the author of *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (1987) and *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen and Ford* (1993). In the excerpt below, Banta discusses occult imagery of the poem and in so doing moves between two traditionally antithetical modes of art versus science in order to explain its aesthetic qualities.]

In terms of what might be called “the critics’ sublime” there is ever the question of how we as scholar-interpreters are to deal in any reasoned way with mysteries considered unfathomable by the human imagination. If the material under review is, say, a poem, literary critics such as Harold Bloom will scorn the contemptible notion of giving recognition to the occult—that Harlot Mystery protective of the secret knowledge and power it denies to mankind at large. To Bloom in *The Visionary Company*, Blake’s vital iconoclasm is arrayed against the drift by Coleridge into “orthodox babbling,” and fiery humanism’s intuitions are triumphant over the enslaving obscurantism of both cold reason and darkling superstition. If we shift from art to science in order to try to assess the legitimacy of the scientific responses to the occult, we meet with scathing remarks about the “irresponsible and trendy academicians” currently cluttering up the history of science by efforts to link the discoveries of true scientists with the dabbings of alchemists. Think, then, what risks are involved when the attempt is made—as I shall here—to take up a particular problem in the occult which requires movements between art (the painting and the poem) and science (the study of pure light and prismatic color) in order to come nearer to the aesthetics, physics, and metaphysics of the sublime—drawing all these considerations through the fine mesh of that sieve we call Romanticism.

Turner and Shelley (with Blake as their foil) are the leading human figures of this paper, but the conceptions and visualizations of the sun form its true center. The specific images to which I shall refer are these: the poet-Self at the end of “Adonais” leaping through the dome of many-colored glass into the high white purity of the Ideal; the aureoled Human Form Divine celebrating the “Glad Day” of its self-fulfillment; the imperious “Angel Standing in the Sun” dissolving the sky and our hearts in awesome manifestation of the Unknowable. These images, and these questions of crucial moment to the Romantic mind: Is the sun to be approached in terms of vision (optics) or the visionary (intuition)? Is its meaning restricted to the coterie of occultists or thrown open to the inquiries of the newly accredited sciences? Is its blaze of light the final revelation by which the human imagination is to be freed or the ultimate mystery by which the craving for omniscience and omnipotence will be frustrated?

Sir David Brewster, Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, was a lifelong student of optics whose treatises on light and color were frequently consulted by Turner. In 1832, Brewster opened the argument of *Letters on Natural Magic, addressed to Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* by denouncing (as had Blake and Shelley) the “spiritual despotism” by which “The prince, the priest, and the sage” acted through possession of esoteric knowledge of chemistry, drugs, astronomy, and optics “to deceive and enslave their species. . . .” Yet, Brewster is pleased to declare, contemporary science can now look back upon what the ancients called impenetrable mysteries to detect in them man’s first discoveries of the natural origins of all earthly events. (. . .)

If the Romantic artist had to consider the effects upon his vision of the stance he took between science (demonstrable laws we can know by our own efforts) and the occult (divine mysteries we may never have disclosed to us), he had also to contend with that knot of feelings associated with the sublime; he had to decide the degree to which the mind forbids or furthers its awareness of how and why the great sun lights up the heavens. In 1832, Sir David Brewster insisted that scientific knowledge in league with religious feeling puts an end to terror in the face of the sun’s powers. But there were those who said that religion without terror is a self-contradiction, while the science that knows no tightening of the heart over its perceptions of the vast, wild, essentially ungovernable forces abroad in the universe—no better represented than by the sun’s blaze—is no true science. Thomas Weiskel in his finely provocative book on the Romantic Sublime defines it as that which transcends the human—that “ultimacy” lying beyond our capacity to come to any complete comprehension of its being or its purpose. Marked by infinity and eternity, *larger* and *longer* than human measurements can fathom, such a sense of “more” requires, as Weiskel argues, a god-term. By the eighteenth century, “light” or “sun” had become preeminently the term by which men tried to express the overwhelming experience that came to them as they witnessed the material fact of inexplicable power. Whether the origins and purposes of that power, and the reasons why it could so stir the mind, would remain forever hidden or could be discovered to human understanding was the issue. However uneasy the Romantics of agnostic inclination may have been over orthodox justifications for the mystery of “ultimacy”—an unease that makes the Romantic Sublime different

from the more serene experience declared by Akenside, Addison, Young, and Burke—they had to deal with the fact that, as Weiskel puts it, there is “no way to keep the sublime closed to ‘mystical’ explanations”; the influx of energy that sets the soul soaring may well come from “some suprapersonal reservoir which cannot be refuted or verified.” (. . .)

The scholarship on Shelley has had much to say about his concerns with science, occultism, the ideal, the sublime, the hopes he placed in the power of the imagination to rise above the mundanity of nature and of life, and the extreme frustrations he experienced over its limits. There is no lack of evidence concerning Shelley’s continual, and varied, examination of light as a metaphor for the unknowable. But in whatever direction Shelley turned, he could not be consoled. Rather than submission, he often felt the rage of his frustration before the sealed door of the unknown—rage, and also the guilt and anxieties that slew the confidence of the “sensibility poets” of whom Weiskel writes and among whom I number Shelley. Rage, guilt, anxieties, the inability to live at ease in this world, and the occasional urge to move into the de-creating glory of death—this is how Harold Bloom in *The Visionary Company* reads the poetic voice in “Adonais” of 1821 in which the speaker vanishes, absorbed by the same baffling mysteries he had once eagerly aspired to break open.

—Martha Banta, “Adonais and the Angel: Light, Color, and the Occult Sublime,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1977): pp. 113, 115–16.



## BARRY MAGARIAN ON SHELLEY’S REWORKING OF THE ELEGIAC GENRE

[In the following excerpt, Barry Magarian discusses the poem in terms of an elegy, a poem memorializing a deceased person, and the number of ways in which it contradicts conventional expectations of that genre.]

*Adonais*’s (1821) treatment of death makes the poem peculiarly provisional in terms of its emotional and intellectual outlook. The

subject of death is initially one that fosters a mood of consolatory lamentation. It ends by precipitating and pressing forward a view of imaginative and spiritual liberation. The latter view is intimately connected with the glimpse the poem offers at the end of a higher vision that apparently signals a harmonious union with Adonais while also suggesting a demonic force that, in itself, is at odds with harmony. Such duality, both in the fact of the changing perceptions of death that the poem offers, and in the simultaneously harmonious and demonic vision of life beyond the grave, accounts for the poem's difficulty. The poem, like all pastoral elegies, begins by grieving for the loss of a life but ends, unlike other elegies, by grieving for life itself and insisting on the need to get beyond its distorting veil ('Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity'). It, like *The Triumph of Life* (1822), conveys a sense of life as the progenitor of a process of victimization and disfiguration. The poem is indeterminate because it vividly recreates this sense of life as a *cul de sac* that stifles, as opposed to enlarges, imaginative and spiritual possibilities, while suggesting a solution—an entry into a higher realm—that may be merely an act of pragmatic escapism. *Adonais* strains to reach toward a solution to the problem of loss and bereavement. Such straining lifts the poem into realms of the imagination, while also confronting both Shelley and the reader with a sceptical and comfortless view of the problem of death. { . . }

Keats's death was the immediate trigger to the writing of the poem. The enduring legacy of Keats's poetry is acknowledged by the various allusions to it which serve the function of suggesting Keats's literary presence and this, in turn, parallels the gradual articulation of the fact of his presence in nature later on in the poem. The volume of 1820 entitled *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other poems* has a prominent place in Shelley's mind. The poems in this volume were the ones most admired by Shelley.

In Ross Woodman's words, *Adonais* 'concerns the plight of the visionary in a society controlled by tyrannical forces.' Shelley felt himself to be such a figure and consequently the writing of the poem provided an opportunity to mourn his own, as well as Keats's fate.

The personal edge to the work is foreshadowed in early drafts of the Preface, later cancelled by Shelley on the advice of John Taaffe. Here Shelley self-deceptively tries to make nonchalant his own

disappointment with the way in which he has been received by the literary establishment: 'I will allow myself a first and last word on the subject of calumny as it relates to me.' Shelley also paints a picture of a fatalistic reclusiveness that has been forced upon him: 'As a man, I shrink from notice and regard; the ebb and flow of the world vexes me; I desire to be left in peace.' (<...>)

Implicit in the following extract is the sense of death as release: 'it would be one subject less for regret, to me, if I could consider my death as no irremediable misfortune to you' (To Claire Clairmont, 14 May 1821). The last two extracts point to *Adonais's* obsession with death as a means with which to escape 'the ebb and flow of the world' (from the cancelled Preface), or, in the poem's terms, 'the contagion of the world's slow stain.' This concentration on death leads, in Richard Holmes's view, to a problem: 'The poem seeks to celebrate the indestructible life of the creative spirit, in art and in nature; yet its personal drive and its most intense images tend towards consummation and death.' This, however, is an oversimplified view in that it fails to take into account the poem's altering conceptions of death. It is, after all, the transformation of the perception of death from an initial image of destructiveness to one of liberation undercut by a different kind of destructiveness—that of wilful abandon to the elements—which gives the poem its power.

Another difficulty with the poem is whether it proceeds in a linear fashion. Is Shelley's awareness of his ending apparent at the start of the poem, and if it is, does that not make the sense of the poem as a voyage of discovery, in some way, redundant? (<...>)

It is important to bear in mind that Shelley's poem can only give the illusion of happening in time. By virtue of the fact that it is so carefully wrought and orchestrated it immediately suggests a painstaking artifice and completedness that has no equivalent in real time and, by implication, real life. The poem exists as a whole and should be read as such, with an awareness of its ongoing and fluid structure. This position has been carefully and comprehensively articulated by Earl Wasserman. His main argument is that *Adonais* proceeds by virtue of the fact that each of its movements provide a successive redefinition of the central concerns and themes of what has gone before so that the poem only comes into its own right by its end, at which time it has been fitted into a wider thematic and

imaginative context. This argument illustrates how the poem must be read both with an awareness of its *whole* structure—so much of a piece is the poem—but also with a sense of its ongoing fluidity. Like Adonais himself who is continually being redefined and transmuted into other incarnations, the poem is also moulding itself into successive realisations of its own meaning. The movement by which these various modes are effected is very carefully wrought. *Adonais* adheres to the formal precision of the pastoral elegy and wants to impose strict order on the chaos of grief. However, the poem's emotion is eventually of a kind that is more heartfelt and acute than formal and reserved and this signals a radical departure from, say, the strictly impersonal elegies of Bion and Moschus. The final third of the poem is a display of rhetorical rapture that suggests that the poet has glimpsed into a world whose engulfingness goes hand in hand with such rapture.

—Barry Magarian, “The Indeterminacy of Shelley’s *Adonais*: Liberation and Destruction,” *The Keats-Shelley Review* 9 (Spring 1995): pp. 15, 16–19.

