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Mirroring the Future
Adonais, Elegy, and the Life in Letters

IN ELEGY, A POETIC VOICE confronts the threat of its own dissolution, and works to forge an enduring, living form by which its author merits inclusion in a pantheon of the poets. Elegy is an inaugural genre, most attractive to a poet on the cusp of his (or her) literary career. From the outset, *Adonais,* the pastoral elegy that Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote for his fellow poet, John Keats, strikes an odd note. It was written at a time when pastoral elegy had become both obsolete and explicitly maligned. Furthermore, *Adonais* comes from the pen of a poet not just mature but even infamous. *Alastor,* the long elegiac poem that anchors Shelley's first published poetic work, comes closer to fitting the traditional pattern. Though ending on a dismal note, *Alastor* marks a poetic birth, not least of all through a pointed refusal of the traditional tropes of elegy that defines the terrain of Shelley's own surpassing genius. Five years later, however, in *Adonais*, Shelley adopts the conventions of pastoral elegy with a tenacious energy. The resulting poem has struck many as bound by mortality and marked by despair. Rather than going forward, like Milton's Swain, "to fresh Woods, and Pastures new," *Adonais* is by turns tired out, overwrought, and spectacularly suicidal.

To understand *Adonais*, a poem so fiercely traditional that it seems anachronistic, we need to consider both its handling of the conventions that it inherits from the tradition of pastoral elegy and how Shelley's use of them reflects and responds to the condition of the poet in the early nineteenth century. Shelley's poem is driven by the profound shifts in the profession of poetry occasioned by the rise of print culture and a marketplace of letters. These developments altered relations between readers, writers, and texts. Whereas the manuscript circles wherein literary work circulated in an earlier age allowed writers a high degree of influence over both the material dimensions of their texts and how they might be read, print culture opened these intimate

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relations to third parties such as publishers, printers, and periodical review. *Adonais*, as it frames the death of Keats in the context of a vicious paper war, makes these concerns central to its elegiac work. As Shelley knew from his own experience, publishers and reviewers shaped the field of reading and writing in distinctive ways, and with palpable impact on writers' lives. In a larger sense, weaker bonds between writers and readers, and the emerging strength of the market allowed writers and readers to imagine each other differently. Readers gained increased sway as buyers and consumers of literary material, and writers acquired cultural prominence, or notoriety, as the owners of their works.

In recent years, discussion of elegy, with Peter Sacks's *The English Elegy* at the forefront, has addressed the genre in the context of psychoanalytic models that structure maturation, both personal and poetic.[1] Sacks's work revitalized the study of elegy by freeing it from a dry cataloguing of conventions, on the one hand, and from an overemphasis on expression that eclipsed the author's participation in a public generic discourse, on the other. Linking literary performance, psychoanalytic development, and the anthropology of mourning, Sacks gave critics an impressive handling of the conventions of elegy in the context of a powerful interpretive model. A number of critics, however, have complained that this model is too narrow to accommodate the full range of elegiac utterance, and that it falls short of the real quality of lived experience with loss. Critics working with elegies by women argue that an oedipal model fails to account for how elegies by women may embody a different set of conventions and an alternative conception of purpose.[2] Critics working with modern and contemporary elegies, which often deviate significantly from Sacks's norm, take issue with a too rigid demarcation of normative and pathological forms of mourning. Jahan Ramazani, for example, in his *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, suggests that mourning and melancholia are contrasting emphases within mourning and its successful literary expression. For Ramazani, "melancholic mourning" is both a more apt description of lived experiences with loss and a more accurate description of the anti-elegiac shapes of the modern elegy. In the modern era, Ramazani argues, melancholia or anger may provide the elegist with his or her only and best recourse to effectively mourn the dead in the midst of a fast-paced culture intent on forgetting them.[3]

The problem of memory and adequate commemoration under the stress of modern culture has likewise prompted Dominick LaCapra to posit a revised and enlarged concept of mourning or working through. In *History, Theory, Trauma: Representing the Holocaust,* LaCapra argues that a successful work of mourning—one that honors the dead and avoids denial—must recognize "loss that cannot be made good: scars that will not disappear and even wounds that will not heal."[4] *In History and Memory after Auschwitz,* LaCapra expands on this notion. He defines successful working through as an act of

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memory that recognizes differences between the present and the past, and that enacts a performative relation to the past, remembering and taking leave of it in a way that allows for critical judgment and a reinvestment in social life; but he also argues that it may only proceed by acting out or falling silent. For LaCapra, an expanded notion of mourning that clears a place for melancholia and silence is the only way to invest the process with an appropriate ethical dimension, respecting others and otherness, and resisting the tendency to reduce real, historical trauma to an illustrative or explanatory instance of larger, ahistorical patterns which appear in many societies and many contexts across a broad time frame.[5]

My concern with Romantic elegy, and with *Adonais*, one of its most striking examples, shares with recent revisionary work on mourning and on elegy an expanded model of mourning in which melancholia plays a central role. I will argue, thus, that *Adonais* performs a work of mourning, but does not expunge its melancholia. Second, I will contend that the melancholia that marks itself in *Adonais* maps a specific historical condition whose most important manifestation is the changing terrain of reading, writing, and authorship in the era. What *Adonais* mourns—and celebrates—is not so much the death of an individual but rather the advent, which it figures as apocalypse, of reading as a cultural praxis, and the bearing that this has on the identity and person of the author. Specific shifts in the temporality and performativity of the genre ensue, as does a profound rethinking of how the poem frames its inclusion in the tradition of pastoral elegy and the immortality that it secures for its poet and for poetry at its end. *Adonais* is not suicidal, but the life that it saves is a life in letters, one that lives and breathes—if it breathes at all—within the institutional structures and strictures that bind writers and readers in the public sphere.

* * *

The sustained and diligent interpolation of the history of pastoral elegy is *Adonais*'s most salient and remarked upon feature. *Adonais* models itself closely on patterns established by Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, Virgil, Spenser, and Milton, even to the point of mimicry. Shelley's opening line, "I weep for Adonais — he is dead!," is a virtual translation of Bion's, "I wail for Adonis; beauteous Adonis dead," and the poem that Shelley would call a "highly wrought *piece of art*" (*Letters* 294), incorporates an astonishing wealth of material from his precursors in the tradition.[6] The extent of Shelley's borrowing from that tradition quickly forces, as many critics have noted, questions about originality and about the transmission and refashioning of genres, not to mention doubts about the authenticity of the elegist's feeling for the deceased Keats. For most of its defenders, however, the poem pulls itself out, if just barely, from the potentially debilitating debt it seems so intent on paying to its

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antecedents. Earl Wasserman, for example, devotes many pages to convincing his readers that the poem is not in fact exhausted by its deft attention to the mythic and generic forms that so intimately structure it. *Adonais* is more than a "formal construct" notable only for the stylistic skill with which it "adapt[s] fresh substance to a given mold," Wasserman avers.[7] Not only does it abandon the conventions by stanza 40, he notes, but it succeeds in forging a synthetic, self-contained, and self-generating meaning that is "operative within [the] traditional patterns and coexistent with them" but which "transcend[s] their merely formal functions" (463). Stuart Curran concurs, arguing that the poem is anything but derivative; rather, it is "a marvel of generic reconstitution."[8] For Curran, the poem achieves an impossible yet exhilarating balance, a simultaneous apotheosis of imagination and voiding of personality from which readers emerge strengthened and fortified (179–80). For Sacks, *Adonais* rigorously bends to the conventions of pastoral elegy, but steers clear of mimicry by forcing the tradition and its means of consolation to the very brink of their destruction, yet ends by reaffirming their premises with a spectacular and unprecedented energy.

I concur that *Adonais* is continuous with the tradition, and I will argue that it ends by doing what elegies are supposed to do. Subtle differences in tone, content, and rhythm that come to the fore in Shelley's handling of the tradition, however, give it a distinctive cast that has not been adequately addressed. *Adonais* begins with a pointed allusion to Bion's *Lament,* a poem with which it shares numerous details. Where Adonis is mourned by Aphrodite, Adonais is mourned, albeit belatedly, by Urania. Where Adonis is transformed into a flower, the anemone—the wind flower—the body of Adonais "exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath" (173). But *Adonais* signals a departure from Bion as it voices in its second line what Bion can admit only at the very end of his lament, namely that weeping cannot restore the dead.

As Sacks points out, questioning the efficacy of song and of elegy's traditional motifs has become part of the tradition. Spenser in *Astrophel.* his elegy for Sydney, and Milton in *Lycidas*, writers whom Sacks identifies as Shelley's closest relatives in a skeptical tradition in elegy, question the vanity of verse. In *Astrophel,* Spenser scorns and discards the classical heritage, as he has Clorinda imagine the dead Astrophel as a flower, but one that is broken, "untimely cropt," and "but the shadow of his likenesse gone" (33, 58). In *Lycidas,* the poet admits his "false surmise" shortly before turning to affirmation in the last stanza. Neither poet confronts the vanity of verse, however, before gathering sufficient momentum and emotional intensity to withstand the assault of this dangerous, potentially debilitating knowledge, and in both cases the questions function strategically to allow the poet to substitute a more appropriate and vital, specifically Christian, brand of immortality for the pagan models they inherit from the classical tradition. Although *Adonais* follows its precursors in admitting that neither tears nor words can raise the

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dead, the fact that it does so in the second line puts Shelley's poem under a degree of stress without parallel in the history of pastoral elegy. Taking this step so quickly in the poem, however, allows *Adonais* to explore and question the central assumptions that underpin the genre.

The history of pastoral elegy reveals a faith in the performative value of the poet's utterance that motivates prior elegists to sing. Many elegists question whether they have the strength to accomplish their purpose, often calling for help from the muses or from a sympathetically grief-stricken nature. But few doubt the efficacy, or question the value of grief itself. In *Adonais* this belief comes under swift scrutiny, and Shelley's verses are consequently marked by a drowsy, even moribund quality. Sleepy Urania, whom we find immersed in echo and fading melody, her eyes veiled, is a prominent fixture in the poem. The poet repeatedly asks her to wake and weep, but cancels his request before she has even begun to rouse, making his own utterance doubly superfluous. These early stanzas seem overwrought and consequently artificial. They are pervaded by a "quality of chill," writes Wasserman. Sacks points out that the poet can neither locate a sense of purpose nor find the energy to begin his work. The poem sustains this debilitating irony in the stanzas that follow, as a parade of ineffectual and inept mourners hasten Adonais's decay. The "quick Dreams, / The passion-winged Ministers of thought" (73-74) that were Adonais's flock, embalm and dismember the poet's body. "Invisible Corruption" who, in stanza 8, waits at the door, not yet daring to deface "so fair a prey," is actually roused and set to work in stanza 25 by the belatedly awakened Urania.

The way that Shelley's poem consistently questions the efficacy of mourning and of his own verse drains the traditional compensatory figures of elegy of their energy. In stanza 13, the mourners form a "slow pomp . . . Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream" (116-17). In stanza 14, Morning, her eyes "Wet with tears" and her hair unbound, allows the melancholy moan of thunder, the pale and unquiet ocean, and sobbing winds to take the day (120-26). In stanza 16, Spring becomes wild, and throws down her kindling buds, "as if she Autumn were," but does so in a syntax that undercuts the energy of her protest. Hyacinth and Narcissus stand by, wan and sere (140-42).

We might expect the inadequacy of elegiac language and its strategies of symbolic compensation to either provoke a crisis for the poet or at least to elicit his protest. In *Alastor*, for example, Shelley uses the frailty of conventional elegiac language as a foil to the dead poet's surpassing spirit. "Art and eloquence, / And all the shews o' the world are frail and vain / To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade," the poet proclaims (710-12). But such restlessness and proud intensity are absent from *Adonais*. The contrast is clearly

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marked in how *Adonais* interpolates *Lycidas*, a poem that also begins with crisis and question. In *Lycidas* we read:

> Yet once more, 0 ye Laurels, and once more
> Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sere,
> I come to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
> And with forc'd fingers rude,
> Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
> (1-5)

These lines have a rough emotional intensity. The poet is not ready, but the occasion is pressing and compels him to sing, despite his immaturity. Lycidas "must not float upon his wat'ry bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind, / Without the meed of some melodious tear" (12-14). *Adonais* follows Milton's lead carefully. Milton's muse, Urania, plays a central role in *Adonais,* and, like Milton, Shelley uses the juxtaposition of water and fire imagery as an organizing structure to map the juxtaposition of death and life and to open a path for transmuting mortality into immortality. But where *Lycidas* is intense, *Adonais* is numb. Notably, the urgency and anguish that *Lycidas* associates with the "wat'ry" death of King and the crisis of knowing words to be but false surmise in its face is absent in Shelley's handling of the same set of associations. In the first place, not only does the poet send Urania back to sleep before she has even roused herself, but he too is deadly calm. Adonais's wat'ry descent into death provokes neither calamity nor crisis. In *Lycidas,* the poet asks, "Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep / Clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas?" (50-51). Shelley's poem asks the same question, but what was for Milton a "remorseless deep" that "Clos'd o'er the head of . . . lov'd Lycidas," is for *Adonais* an "amorous deep" where the dead poet can take his fill of "dewy sleep" and "of deep and liquid rest" (62, 63). Later, in the penultimate stanza of *Lycidas*, Milton recognizes how very remorseless the deep is when he sees that what he has brought to bear in the face of this death has been but "false surmise," as futile as that of the absent Nymphs. All the flowers of poetic language are now seen as a mere interlude, "a little ease" (152), that defers recognition of the finality of death. For Milton, however, seeing figurative language and the poet's work as false surmise leads to an abysmal understanding that Lycidas is truly gone, his body and bones lost and scattered beneath the whelming tide. The depth of this despair, in turn, lays the groundwork for the poem's turn from grief to affirmation, for in its extreme passion the poet finds himself still alive. Thus the final stanza opens with, "Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more, / For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead, / Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor" (165-67). In *Adonais*, however, the flowers of poetry, which, like Milton's "false surmise" hide the "coming bulk

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of death," provoke no crisis. Indeed, Shelley scandalously describes the stench of death and decomposition—what the flowers ought to mask—as itself sweet. The leprous corpse "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" (173-76).

Although Shelley quickly rejects this sweet decay as a false surmise, namely that vegetative renewal offers no viable recompense to the bereaved poet, he broaches here and elsewhere an erotic joining of love and death that recalls, as Jennifer Wallace notes, his earlier translation of Moschus's *Lament for Bion*, which builds an anthropomorphic eroticism into Moschus's simple call for nature to share his grief.[9] In Shelley's translation, tender herbs, dejected buds, and drooping blooms breathe with melancholy sweetness and languid love. He thus recalls the speaker in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," "half in love with easeful Death" who finds it "rich to die" (52, 55), a locution that Shelley repeats in his preface to *Adonais*, describing the Protestant Cemetery in Rome where Keats, like Shelley's beloved son, William, was buried. "The cemetery is an open space among the ruins covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place," Shelley writes (390). But the sweetness of this death derives not from the poet's melancholy or suicidal desire to join Keats or William in a lovely and romantic tomb. Rather, it derives from the foreknowledge that although oceans do not give up their dead, elegies do. The sea will not restore Edward King to life, but Milton's "wat'ry floor" *will* cast Lycidas as the "genius of the shore." Shelley, an atheist, does not believe that Keats will rise again, but he cannot pretend to doubt the outcome of his elegy. The fact that Shelley's deep is "amorous," while Milton's is "remorseless," marks a profound difference in how the two poets imagine the life and death of letters and how they approach the tradition within which this predicament is addressed. Shelley makes this plain for his reader by inserting a small but telling word: "yet." Shelley knows, where Milton must pretend not to, that the deep *will*, but not "*yet* restore" Adonais "to the vital air" (25–26, emphasis added). He knows it because he has read it.

Adonais carefully follows but also swerves from the patterns set by its precursors in the tradition of pastoral elegy. Rhetorical figures of consolation and the emotional intensity that sustains rhetorical purpose in earlier elegies are consistently drained in Shelley's poem. What is more distinctive, however, is the poem's alternative handling of time. As noted above, Shelley voices in line two what Bion can admit only at the very end of his *Lament for Adonis*. Sacks notes this "unusual prematurity," but suggests that it marks the difficulty with which Shelley, an impetuous Romantic spirit, bends his will to the tradition. For Curran, it suggests a heightening of the artifice and irony that underpin elegy in general. "The pastoral elegy is an ingeniously ironic form," Curran

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points out; Shelley's poem is simply "more extreme in its employment of the ironies it inherits, richly affirming where it most seems to deny" (168, 169). For these critics, the consistency and swiftness of Shelley's skepticism affirms a continuity with the tradition that makes *Adonais* a true heir, a wayward yet prodigal son whose errancy lends strength to his conversion. My contention is that Shelley's poem places questions of continuity and inheritance in a new light. Indeed, it reworks the relation between time and mourning operative for earlier poets in a way that puts their fundamental assumptions about transmission and textuality into question.

The alternate handling of time and mourning that Shelley's poem proffers is particularly salient against the backdrop of Bion's *Lament for Adonis*, the first intertext that forces itself in the poem. While all proper elegies make use of time, the *Lament for Adonis* is a poem structured on the cycle of the seasons and on vegetative renewal. Bion's singer makes time a distinct and explicit resource. The acceptance of death to which the singer comes in the end derives precisely from its vision of time. Although Adonis will not rise from the dead, the poet knows that he will have "time to weep, time to sorrow." For Bion, time is a luxury that eases grief.

The close link that Bion establishes between time and the dynamic of mourning makes the *Lament* almost a case study of a Freudian work of mourning. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud is adamant that mourning cannot happen "at once." Indeed, it requires a "great expense of time and cathectic energy" during which "the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it," he writes.[10] The child's *fort-da* game works a similar transformation. By inscribing the now in which the mother is missing in a temporal continuum that includes her past and future presence, the child's game alters his relation to time, absence, and death. Drawing on Freud, Sacks argues that the genre's distinctive use of rhythmic repetitions helps perform, within the space of literary mourning, precisely this transition. Repetition makes *time*, and, most importantly, alters its quality for the mourner. Time is an agent of death and change, but through repetition, elegy refashions time for the mourner as reassuringly continuous, "a familiar, filled-in medium rather than as an open-ended source of possible catastrophe," Sacks writes (23). What had been a clear threat to the integrity and longevity of the survivor becomes an agent of renewal and a bearer of hope. Though death remains, its catastrophe is assimilated to an ongoing cycle.

What Sacks has to say in the twentieth century about time, mourning, and the unique capacity of language to embody this relation, comes close to replicating what some of Shelley's near contemporaries were saying. Lessing,

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writing on the Laocoön, for example, sees language as a better medium within which to represent a painful subject. Virgil's description of Laocoön is superior to the sculptor's treatment of the subject, according to Lessing, because Virgil is able to make Laocoön's scream part of a continuum of character and the larger context of Laocoön's life. This opportunity is not available to the visual artist, limited as he is to the single, heart-wrenching moment of pain. "Virgil's Laocoön cries out, but this screaming Laocoön is the same man whom we already know and love as a prudent patriot and loving father," writes Lessing.

> There is nothing to compel the poet to compress his picture into a single moment. He may, if he so chooses, take up each action at its origin and pursue it through all possible variations to its end. Each variation which would cost the [visual] artist a separate work costs the poet but a single pen stroke; and if the result of this pen stroke, viewed by itself, should offend the hearer's imagination, it was either anticipated by what has preceded or is so softened and compensated by what follows that it loses its individual impression and in combination achieves the best effect in the world.[11]

Lessing is concerned with the differences between linguistic and visual representation. William Wordsworth makes much the same point in his discussion of the relative merits of poetry and prose. Poetry, as a metered and rhythmic use of language, is a better medium for representing painful subjects. Meter links idea to idea, image to image, in a way that strengthens the ability of language to model itself as temporal flow, and at the same time, softens what would otherwise be painful. "There can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose," Wordsworth writes in his 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. Meter "[divests] language, in a certain degree, of its reality, and [throws] a sort of half-consciousness of unsubstantial existence over the whole composition" that tempers distress with pleasure.[12]

For Lessing, Wordsworth, and later for Sacks, language has its usefulness as a vehicle of consolation heightened to the extent that it shapes itself as temporal flow. When Freud discusses melancholia, the pathological other of normative mourning, notions of arrested development, of being stuck in time, riveted on death, loss, and on the self, predominate. The flow of time is halted, and the mourner's connection to a larger field of concern and participation is severed. The notion that poetic language embodies temporal flow, however, depends on our imagining that the words on a page emanate from, and as, a speaking or singing voice. Jacques Derrida has identified this imaginative

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maneuver as phonocentrism, the privileging of voice and of a living, breathing subject as the locus of an utterance to which the written word refers.[13] Derrida argues that this is a fiction, albeit a necessary one. Shelley's poem, however, calls lyric's bluff, and does so at a moment when the link between written words and speaking voices, between texts and writers, was placed under increased tension by cultural shifts and market forces.

Adonais is distinctive for how it marks Shelley's incursion onto the terrain of tradition as structured by reading and its unstable temporality. When Shelley questions the efficacy of tears to raise the dead in the second line of his elegy, he does not merely accelerate the pace and energy with which he joins the tradition, but shifts the terms on which he joins it. He lets us see that the tradition, the laments of Bion and Moschus, the pastoral elegies of Spenser and Milton, are available to him in an eternal present. Moving in the space of two quick lines from the beginning of Bion's *Lament* to what the earlier poem can know only at the very end, Shelley's poem eclipses, foreshortens, and radically compresses the time of Bion's *Lament* in a way that collapses the fiction of voice, body, and breath within it. When Shelley inserts the word "yet" into his allusion to Milton's wat'ry deep, he does the same thing, compressing the flow of Milton's poem, the time it takes to get from beginning to end, into a single, compact moment. Like his precursors, Shelley uses the conventional motifs and strategies of elegy, but he inhabits them with a difference. Rather than appropriating or creatively refashioning the tradition, Shelley *cites* it. He refuses to indulge in or sustain the fictions that have secured its performative power and calls attention to the written dimensions by which it is available to him.

Harold Bloom's work on the dynamics of poetic influence helps clarify the distinction I make between creative refashioning and reading. Working with a model of oedipal conflict and resolution, Bloom argues that a strong poet must displace his poetic forefathers. This impetus is particularly important for a poet working in a highly structured and intensely traditional genre like the pastoral elegy. This operation, however, proceeds indirectly; it depends on a calculated, although occulted, rupture and forgetting. A strong poem must neither imitate nor compete directly with its forefather, for neither strategy affords the younger poet the possibility of winning. Indeed, the precursor is so strong and so well established as to be virtually invincible on its own terms. The only recourse the younger poet has is to deliberately misread the precursor's work. This is a tricky maneuver, however, because the younger poet cannot let himself know what he is doing. He must work with his eyes closed, "as though it were midnight, a suspended midnight," Bloom writes, for only in this midnight of forgetting can the younger poet find the energy to overcome the enervating power of the tradition.[14] Creation, for Bloom, presupposes forgetting—but only for a time—the priority of the precursor text.

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Forgetting is generative; it opens a space and a present within which the younger poet can breathe, so to speak, relieving him of the fear of being a mere copy, a second son and not an heir.

Bloom's model does a good job of describing how elegists in particular have entered the tradition. Although all of the pastoral elegists know the conventions established by their forefathers and follow them with precision, each must pretend at the beginning that he does not know the end. Elegy, like all highly conventional genres, is imbued with artifice. Elegy is modeled as feeling, but its composition requires a cool and level head, and its object is rarely more than an occasion for the exercise of the younger poet's prowess. Indeed, too much and too fond a feeling for the deceased detracts from the elegy's handling of the delicate structures that organize it. Furthermore although a pastoral elegist must bend his utterance to convention and precedent, he must do so as if they appeared for the first time, and with an intense belief in the efficacy of his own utterance to accomplish its fictive end. As Bloom would put it, the poet must agree to close his eyes to the redundancy of the moment.

The calculated forgetting central to Bloom's analysis foregrounds *topoi* of breaking and rupturing that recur in many pastoral elegies, while at the same time touching base with critical terms like pretense and paradox that recur in discussions of the genre and of mourning generally. Sacks focuses on how elegies, through the use of figural language and by making recourse to techniques like repetition, defer death. W. David Shaw, in his recent book on elegy, posits paradox as central to how the genre works.[15] Treatments of the genre that draw on mythic cycles and on rituals of renewal likewise focus attention on how the severed head of Orpheus, for example, can blossom into song or on how the severed body of Dionysus can fertilize the earth and bring forth rebirth. Many myths adopt similar premises, and many elegies make recourse to them. Although *Adonais* passes from the precincts of death into those of life and forges out of the shards of mortality, out of the glassy "many-colored" fragments of life's dome trampled by death, a vision of the "white radiance of Eternity" (462–63), it does so without closing its eyes. In *Adonais,* Shelley refuses to forget, refuses to close his eyes to the fact that Bion's *Lament* and Milton's *Lycidas* are not songs. Much like Alice, who sees that the Queen of Hearts and her ugly henchmen are nothing but a deck of cards, *Adonais* shows us that poems are words on a page that exist in the simultaneity of the present to be read, revised, rewritten, and reworked at will by the reader.

* * *

If elegy is to work, it must find a way past the present in which the power of death and loss predominate, towards a future in which loss may become gain. The body must be buried, the seal set on the tomb, so that the poet can

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turn to face the new day. *Adonais* thus brings Keats's body to its final resting place in Rome, and turns toward a light that burns "through the inmost veil of Heaven" (493). How Shelley is able to do this, particularly having renounced so much, poses a particular challenge, and one on which the unity of the poem rests. Stanzas 30-38 address this challenge. These stanzas, which introduce the poet's "Peace, peace. He is not dead, he doth not sleep— / He hath awakened from the dream of life" (343-44), in stanza 39, leave Urania and the traditional consolations of elegy behind. Indeed, we understand that the traditional figures and strategies, like Urania, the muse of Milton and the past, are chained to time, unable to meet the poet's present predicament. In their place, Shelley introduces a present context, as he calls a parade of "mountain shepherds" to troop by the deathbed of Adonais. As is well recognized, these shepherds are allegorical figures for the contemporary readers of Keats's poetry. The "Pilgrim of Eternity" (264) is Byron and the "sweetest lyrist" (269) from wild Ierne is Thomas Moore. "He, who, gentlest of the wise, / Taught, soothed, loved, honoured the departed one" (312-13) is Leigh Hunt and the "frail Form, / A phantom among men" (271-72), who stands out as a spectacular figure of woe, is Shelley himself. A turn to a present context of reading also opens the door to the hostile critic whose barbed words brought Adonais low.

What happens in this stage of the poem is central to how the elegy forges a viable consolation. In order for the poem to maintain its unity, the consolation that it will posit must ground itself on the dismal knowledge that it has made integral to its fabric in the preceding stanzas. This is what Wasserman suggests when he explains that the final phase of the poem and its final consolation must shape itself out of the imagery and dynamic potentialities whose failure the poem explores in its earlier phases. Although Wasserman's reading of the imagery and dynamic of the poem is impressive and comprehensive, I suggest that Shelley's concerns may have been of a more homely, banal nature. Stanzas 30-38 make these concerns clear as they open the question of Keats's fate to the broader context of his contemporary readers. Shelley's strategy in these stanzas works on several different levels. In the first place, opening the poem to contemporary reading and readers opens the context that, to Shelley's mind, he shared most intimately with Keats. As biographers and critics have often noted, Shelley was not close to Keats. Indeed, their correspondence attests to the predominantly writerly and critical context of their relationship. What concerned Shelley most about Keats was not his fate as a person but as a writer, a fate that Shelley feared he would share. In letters written shortly after Keats's death, Shelley slips seamlessly from considering the reception of Keats's work to considering that of his own. If Shelley now enters his own poem as one "Who in another's fate now wept his own" (300), it is because, as he put it in the letter to Joseph Severn in which he enclosed a copy of

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Adonais, he resembles the maligned Keats most in "a want of popularity" (*Letters* 366).

Shelley's concern with reading and reception forms his closest bond to Keats. Moreover, the figures whom Shelley imagines passing the bier of the dead Adonais underscore his sense of the plurality and variability of reading. Shelley includes Byron, who had little admiration for Keats's poetic abilities, Moore, who seems to have been for the most part indifferent to Keats, Hunt, an ardent enthusiast of Keats's poetry, and himself, whose position relative to the merits of Keats's work was ambivalent. Shelley furthermore imagines the hostile critic as, at least indirectly, part of their company. As the shepherds make their way past Adonais's bier, the hostile critic—and an abusive potential available to reading—hovers overhead, threatening and haunting the shepherds' tamer, though divided reading.

As Sacks notes, bringing the hostile critic and his like into the poem provides the speaker with "a burst of energy that will fuel his subsequent ascent" (158). Indeed, stanzas 37 and 38, which broach in direct and intensely honest terms the fact of Keats's death, occupy a position exactly equivalent to *Lycidas's* penultimate stanza, which brings Milton's poem to its turn. I suggest that these stanzas locate readers and reading as the ground of Keats's death and of his rebirth. Where *Lycidas* posits the false surmise that ushers in a vision of a body lost and broken by the ocean waves, *Adonais* posits the plurality and volatility of reading as what smashes Keats's body into atoms, but also shapes the enduring form of his immortality.

Shelley's self-portrait as the frail Form, the pardlike Spirit, "a love in desolation masked;—a Power / Girt round with weakness" (281-82) makes this even clearer. Shelley's entry, particularly in such dramatic and self-important guise, has provoked critical comment from many quarters. In the twentieth century, F. R. Leavis has been the most strident in noting its inappropriateness and in casting it as an egotistical display that breaches the bounds of elegiac decorum. In response to Leavis, Judith Chernaik, Angela Leighton, and Curran have mounted defenses of Shelley to which my reading is indebted. For Chernaik, the figure is not Shelley himself, but a stylized portrait of the lyric poet that recurs in much of Shelley's poetry. It encapsulates Shelley's concern with the place of poets and of poetry in the Romantic era. Drawing on Chernaik, Leighton asserts that the frail form dramatizes "an aesthetic process," which Leighton reads as the tension played out across the whole poem between language and its ability to sustain inspiration or to adequately rise to its context.[16] Curran likewise notes how abstract qualities and oxymoron predominate in the presentation of the frail form, suggesting its strategic rather than autobiographical affiliation. For Curran, Shelley's sketch of himself in the guise of the frail form suggests that he has subjected himself to a force similar to that to which Keats's form has been subject. "As the dead

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Adonais has been divested of the attributes of his personal life mythologized in the early stanzas of the poem, so the mourner 'Who in another's fate now wept his own,' contemplating in formal ritual the principles underlying the death of Keats, refines himself formally into principle," Curran explains (174).

These defenses are important for opening the strategic function of the frail form in the context of the poem. And they stress something that twentieth-century readers readily accept, namely, as Shelley put it in a letter to the Gisbornes, that "the poet and the man are of two different natures" (*Letters* 310). Shelley's self-portrait in the guise of the frail form, however, brings man and poet together not only through the lens of reading but through the reading that the poem has itself undertaken. In the frail form, Shelley cites his own reading praxis and assumes its burden and guise. First, it brings Shelley into close identification with the dead Keats. As many critics have sketched out, Shelley draws on a similar set of terms and associations to describe both poets. This is important to the poem's purpose, for the ground that Shelley shares with Keats in his earthly woe sets up the potential for Shelley to share his glorious immortality. It is important to remember, however, that the depiction of the frail Keats is, as James Heffernan has noted, a fiction, saying more about Shelley's own concerns than conveying accurate information about the real details of Keats's life or death.[17] In the frail form, Shelley likens himself to the image of what he has himself made of Keats. This is also to say that he faces himself as the figure of his own readerly praxis and the abusive potential that it has made manifest in the poem. Shelley reinforces this interpretation by decking the figure in the withered trappings of the elegiac tradition, in the "faded violets" and "pansies overblown." What the elegiac tradition has become, and what Adonais is, Shelley now becomes.

Adonais discovers and attests to the volatile power of reading in the Romantic era that catches writers in its glare. As Maurice Blanchot explains, the Romantic era writer comes to understand that identity follows from the work, and is established and opened across the circuit of reading. "Before his work exists," the author is nothing, Blanchot writes, and he comes into existence only when his work leaves his hands and enters a public sphere. For Blanchot, as for Shelley, this is a "disconcerting ordeal," for it means that the person of the author belongs in very real ways to readers who may be capricious, bored, partial, or simply ill-formed.[18] As Heffernan has persuasively demonstrated, it is highly unlikely that even Shelley could have believed that Keats had been killed by a hostile review. For Heffernan, Shelley's myth of death by review, and the weak, effeminate Keats that he depicts in his elegy, work to displace onto Keats Shelley's own sense of acute vulnerability about his power and vision as a poet. Viewed through the context of reading and reception, however, *Adonais* demonstrates, and not least of all in how it uses

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—or "consumes"—Keats and his works for its own ends, the sway that readers, good and bad, exert over the person of the writer. Keats had not been killed by a review, but both Shelley and Keats suffered in real ways as a consequence of the hostile reviews flying across the pages of *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly*. The honesty and strength of *Adonais* as a poem lies in how it performs but then submits itself to the disconcerting ordeal of reading. *Adonais* thus allegorizes the fate of the Romantic writer offered up as written remains to readers whose gaze may cut and splice, rework and revise, the body of work before them, just as Shelley's own poem has done both to his precursors in the elegiac tradition and to the dead Keats. As Shelley figures himself in the frail form, casting himself as a double to the living/dead Adonais, he explicitly offers himself up to the same fate that he wrought upon (for) Keats, and situates whatever measure of immortality is available to poet or poem within the frame of its future reading.

Adonais is thus not a poem about the life and death of people. Nor is it a poem about the acceptance of death as an ontological condition. Rather, it is a poem about the life and death of letters. Failing to recognize this fact leads to an insuperable quandary at the end of the poem as one must reconcile what seems to be a suicidal gesture with the ends of the genre that Shelley has adopted with such care.[19] Indeed, any reading of *Adonais* that filters the poem through humanistic assumptions is bound to run into trouble, for *Adonais* is not a humanistic, but a lettristic, poem. Shelley does not mourn in any conventional sense but rather engages in something more akin to a critical exercise, albeit one in which he is an interested party. We should recall that Shelley intended to accompany the elegy with a projected but unrealized critical commentary on Keats's poetry, and made reference to this project in his preface to the poem. What humanistic value *Adonais* may have derives not from Shelley's fear of death, but from his concern both with the fate and the reception of his poetry.

* * *

No reading of *Adonais* can conclude without visiting the final stanzas of the poem. The imaginary voyage to Rome underscores the poem's fundamental concern with the immortality available to the artwork and its creator in the present era. Rome, "more like a sepulchre than a city; beautiful, but the abode of death," as Shelley wrote to Amelia Curran (*Letters*, 159), provides Shelley with an appropriate setting within which to explore how the "remnants" of an artist's mind persist in an era of increasing cultural dispersion and moral degradation. "What shall I say of the modern City?" Shelley wrote in one of several letters to Peacock describing Rome and its monuments. "Rome is yet the Capital of the World. It is a city of palaces & temples more glorious than those which any other city contains, & of ruins more glorious than they"

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(*Letters* 87). Rome is a city that juxtaposes with a sublime and even monstrous quality the vitality of life in all of its myriad moral and political complexity with the monumental preservation of a past fallen into ruin. It is "at once the Paradise, / The grave, the city, and the wilderness" (433-34). More specifically, however, Rome figures for Shelley the site par excellence of the cultural transmission that Shelley's own poem has performed on or for the dead Keats. The link becomes clear as Shelley writes:

> Seen from any of the eminences that surround it, [Rome] exhibits domes beyond domes & palaces & colonnades interminably even to the horizon, interspersed with patches of desart & mighty ruins which stand *girt by their own desolation* in the midst of the fanes of living religions & the habitations of living men in sublime loneliness. (*Letters* 87, emphasis added.)

Shelley's letter brings Rome into close proximity with his own self-representation as the frail form, the pardlike Spirit, "a Love in desolation masked;—a Power / Girt round with weakness" (281-82). The strong parallel that holds between the frail but powerful force of Shelley's own reading and the Rome towards which Shelley's poem tends inscribes Shelley's reading within the arena of history, as a part of that larger process by which culture is preserved and transmitted through the ages. As Shelley comes to Rome, he offers himself, and the written traces that he will and, indeed, has already become, up to the "white radiance of Eternity" (463), which is also the "shadow of white Death" (66), the "gigantic shadow that futurity casts upon the present," for it is the immortality granted to the dead through the aegis of unknown readers.

Shelley's poem is neither a defense of suicide, nor is it the triumph of imaginative despair that many of its readers have found it to be. The "fierce convulse" with which the poet "die[s] into life"[20] at the end of *Adonais* shadows his present as the mirror of a future reading. Sacks wrote that *Adonais* brings the genre of elegy to "the brink of its own ruin" (165). The apocalyptic intensity of its final lines, and its marked departure from the consolatory dynamics of elegy, reflect not so much the (virtual) ruin of elegy but the shape that elegy must take in the wake of the radical change in the nature of reading and writing that coincides with the Romantic era, a change that makes writers creatures of the works that they send forth to an increasingly distant, unknown, and unknowable audience. The Romantic melancholia that speaks —or writes itself—so saliently in *Adonais* limns a cultural shift which continues, indeed, to describe our own condition as readers and writers whose lives reside in the circulation of textual artifacts and whose fates are decided by the success or failure of those artifacts to garner professional and institutional sanction. The life and death of letters of which Shelley's poetry partakes and

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which his prose explicitly thematizes is also our life and death, and the Romantic text, uniquely haunted by its future, by its passing into the hands of its readers, shadows forth our own ghostliness, our own existence as the institutional epiphenomena of our reading and writing.

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Notes

1. Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
2. Celest M. Schenck, "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-constructing the Elegy," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.1 (1986): 13–27.
3. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 29–30. Melissa M. Zeiger's reading of modern and contemporary elegies also sees melancholia as an intimate and integral component of mourning and its literary expression. For Zeiger, the central structuring role played by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the tradition of elegy locates a feminine, melancholic thrust within elegy that modern and contemporary elegies by both men and women make more explicit. See *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
4. Dominick LaCapra, *History, Theory, Trauma: Representing the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 66.
5. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
6. Citations from *Adonais* and its preface are taken from Shelley's *Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977). Citations from Shelley's letters are taken from *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, vol. 2, *Shelley in Italy* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964).
7. Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 463.
8. Stuart Curran, "*Adonais* in Context," in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 166.
9. Jennifer Wallace, *Shelley and Greece: Rethinking Romantic Hellenism* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 113.
10. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Meloncholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. 14 (1914-1916) (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), 244-45.
11. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lacoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, ed. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1984), 23-24.
12. William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth,* ed. E. de Selincourt, vol.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 399.
13. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

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14. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 78, 79.
15. W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
16. Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 142-43; and Judith Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972).
17. James Heffernan, "*Adonais*: Shelley's Consumption of Keats," *Studies in Romanticism* 233 (1984): 295-315.
18. Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, tr. P. Adams Sitney (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981), 24.
19. "*Adonais* clearly concludes on a suicidal note," writes Sacks (163). Leighton finds "the last verses of *Adonais* . . . to contain a haunting suspicion that the poem's triumphant statement of immortality might also be a statement of imaginative despair" (148). Likewise, Richard Cronin writes, "by the end of the poem the elegist has committed himself to death, even suicide, and the progression has been driven to its final conclusion" (*Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981], 192).
20. John Keats, *Hyperion: A Fragment,* in *John Keats, Selected Letters and Poems,* ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), lines 129-30.

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