

## The One Remains, the Many Change and Pass: Ambivalent Attitude toward Death and Immortality in P. B. Shelley's *Adonais*

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**Abstract:** This study focuses an attention upon the elegist's ambivalent attitude toward death and immortality in P. B. Shelley's *Adonais*. The poem consists of three movements — 1. Death as termination of life (stanza 1-17), 2. Life-death-rebirth cycle of nature (stanza 18-37), 3. Death as access to eternity (stanza 38-55). The central message of *Adonais* is apparently in stanza 49-55 in the third movement, in which the elegist, or the persona of the poet, is “borne darkly, fearfully, afar”(l.492) to “the abode where the Eternal are”(l.495). The elegist, however, is attracted not only to “the white radiance of Eternity”(l.463) but also to “Life”, which stains it like “a dome of many-coloured glass”(l.462). Moreover, in the second movement, he seems to be more comfortable with the theme of the natural cycle than the theme of death and eternity. That is, the elegist's viewpoint is somewhere between the second and the third movement of the poem. Even in the last stanza of the poem, he hesitates to get into the world of death and immortality.

The paper gives some background information on P. B. Shelley's *Adonais* — the essential background of its composition, the epigram from Plato, pastoral elegy, Shelley's reading experience of Platonic/Neoplatonic writers, and recurrent key images in the poem — which make it easier for the readers to better understand or decipher Shelley's original language. Then through a close reading of the poem, it demonstrates that the consistency and development of the poem is mainly attained by Shelley's original use of key images and symbolism. Finally, the present writer reconsiders why Shelley said of *Adonais* that it was “the least imperfect” of his compositions.

**Key Words:** P. B. Shelley, *Adonais*, Death as termination of life, Life-death-rebirth cycle of nature, Death as access to eternity

### 1. The Essential Background of P. B. Shelley's *Adonais*

*Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, Author of Endymion, Hyperion, Etc.* (1821) by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was written on the occasion of the death of his contemporary poet John Keats (1795-1821). Shelley and Keats, brought together by Leigh Hunt, failed to become friends. According to Hunt, “Keats did not take to Shelley as kindly as Shelley did to him”.<sup>1</sup> In July 1820, hearing of Keats's illness, Shelley wrote to invite him to stay at Pisa; but when Keats came out to Italy that winter he went to Rome, where he died on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1821. Shelley had heard of his death by 19<sup>th</sup> April, and on 5<sup>th</sup> June wrote to John and Maria Gisborne: “I have been engaged

these last days in composing a poem on the death of Keats....It is a highly wrought *piece of art*, and perhaps better, in point of composition, than anything I have written.”<sup>2</sup> During the rest of his life (only a little more than a year), Shelley repeatedly referred to *Adonais* as “the least imperfect of my compositions”<sup>3</sup> and “a favourite with me”<sup>4</sup>.

P. H. Butter describes that “According to the gossip which Shelley and Byron were too ready to believe, Keats’s death had been brought about largely by distress over an unfavourable criticism in the *Quarterly Review*. Shelley was more resentful than he liked to acknowledge against the *Quarterly* for a hostile review of his own work”.<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, however, assumes that “Shelley chooses to believe, for his poetic purposes, that Keats was slain by the attacks upon *Endymion*, particularly the one made in the *Quarterly Review*”.<sup>6</sup>

*Adonais* is the formalized lament of Shelley the poet for Keats the poet. But there is not much in the poem about Keats as an individual. As the subtitle of the poem “*Author of Endymion, Hyperion, Etc.*” shows, the focus is not so much on Keats in person as on his literary works.

As P. H. Butter points out, “Keats is transformed into a generalized figure of the poet who brings light into an uncomprehending world; and the reviewer’s hostility becomes a symbol of the world’s incomprehension, its resistance to the light.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Epigram from Plato and the Star-Flower Symbolism

P. B. Shelley took lines from one of the verses in the Greek Anthology attributed to Plato, which are translated by Shelley himself as follows:

“Thou wert *the morning star* among the living,/Ere thy fair light had fled — /

Now, having died, thou are as *Hesperus*, giving/*New splendour* to the dead.” [*Italics mine*]

Keats has passed from the sphere of Lucifer, star of morning, to that of Hesperus or Venus, first light of evening. This is a prefiguration of his fate within the poem.<sup>8</sup> Shelley’s intention is clear, because the importance of star images becomes explicit when *Adonais* is welcomed into heaven as Vesper in stanza 46 in the last movement.

In *Adonais*, the star image is also related with Urania. In her traditional astronomical role Urania’s planet is Venus, one of whose appearance is Vesper, the evening star, and the other Lucifer, the morning star. The name “Hesperus” in the third line of the quotation also suggests that Urania is one of the nine muses of classical mythology.

The second important image in *Adonais* is flowers, which are likened to “incarnation of the stars, when splendour/Is changed to fragrance” (stanza 20, ll.174-175).

E. R. Wasserman suggests that “according to ancient belief, the soul is derived from starry spheres, and great earthly spirits are immortalized by their translation into heavenly bodies” and that “paralleling these metamorphic relationships between *Adonais* and Vesper and between flower and star is the ancient doctrine of the transmutation of the elements, which taught that by

rarefaction earth becomes moisture, air, and then fire, or light; and a cognate belief held that the light of the stars is nourished by moist exhalations from earth”.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Tradition of Pastoral Elegy and P. B. Shelley’s *Adonais*

Shelley’s *Adonais* is recognized as one of the three major elegies written in English. The other two elegies are John Milton’s *Lycidas*(1638) and Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*(1850).

The following is an excerpt from *What is Pastoral Elegy?* (bachelorandmaster.com/): “An elegy is a poem on the death of someone. And pastoral suggest that the elegy is related to 'shepherd', and rustic life. Pastoral elegies are poems in which the poet speaks in the guise of a shepherd in a peaceful landscape and expresses his grief on the death of another shepherd....The pastoral is the form of poetry that deals with the urban poets’ nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting...The most famous example of the pastoral elegy is *Lycidas*, by the English poet John Milton...The occasion for Milton’s pastoral elegy...was the death of Edward King, one of Milton’s younger colleagues at Cambridge, who had drowned on his way to his native place in Ireland....”<sup>10</sup>

Shelley’s *Adonais* is modelled on Bion’s elegy on the death of Adonis and Moschus’ elegy on the death of Bion. It moves through the conventional ritual of mourning, with fellow poets grieving Adonais’ death. But when the cycle of the seasons changes and spring returns, it becomes clear that neither nature nor the grief can have any effect on death. Then Adonais’ death is seen in a different context. From the viewpoint of eternity earthly life is a kind of death in comparison with the full life of the soul released from the limitation of mortality.

### 4. The Platonism of P. B. Shelley

According to J. A. Notopoulos, P. B. Shelley knew the doctrine of Platonism from the following sources:<sup>11</sup>

- ① Petrarch’s *Triumphs*(*I Trionfi*), which constitutes a beautiful dramatization of the Platonic Theme, Life and Death
- ② Plato’s *Parmenides*(*Παρμενίδης*), which was included in the tenth volume of the Bipont edition brought to Italy
- ③ The sixth book of Plato’s *The Republic*(*Πολιτεία*), which Shelley read in 1820 and of which he wrote to Hogg in a letter dated October 20, 1821

J. A. Notopoulos further suggests that Keats’s *Adonais* “is an inextricable fusion of Plato’s metaphysical view of the idea and temporal world as stated in *The Republic*. It is restated in terms of immortality versus mortality in the *Phaedo*, and in terms of Intellectual Beauty, immanent and transcendent, versus the transient shadows in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*...These Platonic themes are sometimes developed separately”, but in the last stanza of *Adonais* “they are blended

into a perfect amalgam of Platonism”.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of the Platonism on Shelley is especially conspicuous in the last part of the third movement of *Adonais*. We'll come back to this later.

### 5. The Outline of *Adonais*

Shelley's *Adonais* consists of three movements — 1. Death as termination of life (stanza 1-17), 2. Life-death-rebirth cycle of nature (stanza 18-37), 3. Death as access to eternity (stanza 38-55). While the first two movements are based on the traditional elegiac form, the last one is not. As some scholars such as J. A. Notopoulos, C. Baker and M. O'Neill suggest, the third movement or the entire poem is inspired by such writers as Dante, Plato and Petrarch.

The first movement of the poem is based on the assumption that life must eventually end in nothingness of death. The elegist urges the fatal Hour, in which Adonais/Keats died, and his mother Urania to mourn the young man, as his Dreams, Desires, Adorations, Persuasions — “all he had loved, and moulded into thought” — already mourn him. The theme of the second movement is that in nature death feeds life and life illumines death. Nature is reborn as Urania visits the grave of Adonais; there, unable to revive him as she revives nature, she grieves for him, and some other poets, including G. G. Byron, Thomas Moore and P. B. Shelley, mourn their dead colleague. The second movement concludes with a retort to the anonymous reviewer whose cowardly attack has killed Adonais. The third movement is based on the philosophy that the ultimate reality is neither matter nor vitality, but spirit. It asserts that Adonais has not really died, but rather that we, the living, exist in a realm of distorted vision and illusion from which Adonais has escaped to be reunited with the One, the spirit of beauty in both nature and human history, and that he is far better off than the living. In the last five stanzas, the elegist, realizing that little of value remains in his own life, is caught up by the spirit of beauty and drawn toward the higher realm from which “the soul of Adonais, like a star” shines as a beacon.

### 6. Recurrence and Transformation of Key Images in *Adonais*

The unity and consistency of *Adonais* is attained by Shelley's original use of key images and symbolism throughout the poem. As mentioned earlier, the central images of the elegy are star-flower images. In the first movement, the flowers, the symbol of organic life, vainly defies death, but in the second movement, is renewed by the impulse death gives to life. And in the third movement, it turns out to be earthly, mortal manifestation of a star, a symbol of eternal soul.

E. R. Wasserman asserts that “through the relation of flower to star an analogous relation has also been established between their adjuncts, dew and light, so that there are both horizontal and vertical relations among Keats-Adonais (the nature god) and Adonais-Vesper, flower and star, dew and light; that is, the relation may also be stated as one between Adonais-flower-dew and

Vesper-star-light. With this final extension, the image pattern attains its full symbolic function, the dew-moisture representing the principle of organic life and light representing absolute life”.<sup>13</sup>

D. H. Reiman suggests “a few of the subtle verbal and symbolic patterns” in the poem:

- ① Urania, initially described as a vegetation goddess, is seen in the end as a spirit that infuses both nature and human creativity—in which human imagination participates and to which it contributes.
- ② The flowers of the early parts of the poem become stars in the final movement.
- ③ The word “splendours” that at first referred to the lost creation of Adonais’ imagination refers in the end to stars in the firmament of time.

That is to say, Keats’ poems, which seemed at first meaningless after the death of their creator, are seen ultimately as undying embodiments of his soul.<sup>14</sup>

A. Epstein asserts that “flowers emerging from soil that is nourished by a grave” is a kind of symbol for *Adonais* itself. “Typically, it is a metaphor that pulls in at least two directions: it suggests that an elegy is like a flower that “deck[s] the dead Season’s bier”(l. 158) as a memorial, at the same time that it, like a plant, feeds on the dead in order to live, even mocking the inert corpse it benefits from with its own vitality(l.17).<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, the present writer pays attention to the image of the veil, “the inmost veil of Heaven” in stanza 55, l. 493 and its variants which appear in the last stanzas of the poem. Shelley’s images of veil make distinction between life and death, or mortality and immortality. The most typical one is the “painted veil” in the Sonnet whose first line goes, “Lift not the painted veil which those who live/call Life” As R. H. Hogle points out, Shelley’s veil image “is symptomatic of a fundamental dualism in Shelley’s conception of the relationship between mind and nature—a dualism all the more evident because of his continuous effort to resolve it into unity”.<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Death as Termination of Life: The First Movement

E. R. Wasserman describes the first movement as follows: monism rules the first movement. Matter is the ultimate and enduring reality, since vitality is not: death is total extinction.<sup>17</sup>

The poem opens with the elegist (or the persona of the poet) weeping for Adonais and urging the reader to join him. In stanza 1-4, he urges Urania to lament again as she did at the death of Milton. Because Shelley thought that Keats’ Miltonic epic fragment “Hyperion” was his best poem and the basis of his claim to recognition, he represents Adonais as being Milton’s posthumous child, whose mother is Urania.<sup>18</sup> The first stanza (ll.1-9) is an exhortation of weeping and mourning, Death is absolute, and tears, a symbol of organic life cannot “thaw” the frost, a symbol of death.

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!*<sup>19</sup> [*Italics mine*]

In the last line of the quotation above, however, the auditory image an “echo” and the visual image a “light”, together with “eternity”, anticipates the third movement of the poem.

A combination of “flowers” and corpse, one of the key images in *Adonais* appears as early as in stanza 2 (ll.19-27).

Where wert thou, mighty Mother, when he lay,  
 When thy Son lay, *pierced by the shaft which flies*  
*In darkness?* where was lorn Urania  
 When Adonais died? With veiled eyes,  
 'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise  
 She sate, while one, with soft enamoured breath,  
 Rekindled all the fading melodies,  
 With which, *like flowers that mock the corse beneath,*  
 He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of Death. [*Italics mine*]

In “pierced by the shaft which flies/In darkness”, Shelley alludes to the anonymous attack on Keats’s *Endymion* in the Quarterly Review, XIX (April 1818), 204-208.<sup>20</sup> The living “flowers” derisively look down on the “corse”(i.e. corpse) above which they grow, but they cannot forever hide the fact that the death is the end to which they and all other things come. The images of flowers have different function in the second movement. The image of “flowers of gentle breath” in stanza 20, l.173, for example, represents the principle of organic life.

“Quench within their burning bed/Thy fiery tears” in stanza 3 (ll. 21-22) is a poetic expression of eyes full of tears. Melancholy Mother’s “fiery tears”, a combination of fire and water anticipates “the burning fountain” in stanza 38 (l. 339).

In stanza 4 (ll.28-36), Urania is called “Most musical of mourners”(l.28) because she is one of the nine muses of classical mythology. According to C. Baker, she is “both a symbol of heavenly love and...a muse who has in her charge the most sublime poetry”.<sup>21</sup> D.H. Reiman suggests that because Shelley thought that Keats’s Miltonic epic fragment “Hyperion” was his best poem and the basis of

his claim to recognition, he represents Adonais as being Milton's posthumous child, whose mother is Urania".<sup>22</sup> But here is a contradiction; although Adonais/Keats will arise no more, the "clear Sprite" of Milton "Yet reigns o'er earth".

Stanza 6 (ll.46-54) echoes Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" in comparing the dead poet to "a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished/And fed with true-love tears". The image refers to the heroine Isabella, who grieves for her lost lover Lorenzo by severing his head and planting it in a flower pot, watering it with tears, until a basil plant is born.

But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished,  
 The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew,  
*Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished,*  
*And fed with true love tears, instead of dew;*  
 Most musical of mourners, weep anew!  
 Thy extreme hope, the loveliest and the last,  
 The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew  
 Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;  
*The broken lily lies—the storm is overpast. [Italics mine]*

As the poem develops, the flower becomes the representation of earthly beauty whose counterpart beyond sublunary realm is the star. "The broken lily" in the last line is a metaphor of Adonais/Keats. It will be transformed into flowers "exhaling" from the corpse in stanza 20.

Images of death and corruption preside over stanza 7 and 8. When the Poet speaks in stanza 7 of "the vault of blue Italian day"(l.59) as a "charnel-roof"(l.60) of Adonais, he introduces the image of the refraction of light into the colours of the rainbow by moisture of Earth's atmosphere. The lines "the vault of blue Italian day/Is yet his fitting charnel-roof" foreshadows "Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, stains the white radiance of Eternity!" in stanza 52, ll.462-463.

In stanza 8 (ll.64-72), before Corruption begins to consume the corpse, the living Dreams of Adonais mourn him. Allusions to "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Ode on Melancholy", "To Autumn", "Ode to a Nightingale", and *Endymion* show that the "quick Dreams" are Keats' poems. "The shadow of white Death" (l.66) foreshadows "the white radiance of Eternity" in stanza 52, l.463.

The line "Like dew upon a sleeping flower", a combination of dew-flower image in stanza 10, l.86 represents the principle of organic life. A "lucid urn of starry dew" in stanza 11, l.91 is a combination of immortal and mortal image.

"Another Splendour" in stanza 12 (ll.100-108) is one of Adonais' mental creations. "Splendour" is a variation of light, which is one of the key images in *Adonais*.

*Another Splendour* on his mouth alit,  
 That mouth, whence it was wont to draw the breath  
 Which gave it strength to pierce the guarded wit,  
 And pass into the panting heart beneath  
 With lightning and with music: the damp death  
 Quenched its caress upon his icy lips;... [*Italics mine*]

The word “splendour” reappears in the third movement in an entirely different concept, “Thou young Dawn/Turn all the dew to splendour”(l.363) in stanza 41 and “The splendours of firmament of Time”(l. 388) in stanza 44. The word “splendour” reminds us of Dante’s word “splendori” in *La Divina Commedia, Paradiso Canto XXIII* (ll.79-84).<sup>23</sup>

Come a raggio di sol, che puro mei  
 per fratta nube, già prato di fiori  
 vider, coverti d’ombra, li occhi miei;  
 vid’ io così più turbe di *splendori*,  
 folgorate di sù da raggi ardenti,  
 senza veder principio di folgóri.<sup>24</sup>

Under a ray of sun that, limpid, streams  
 down from a broken cloud, my eyes have seen,  
 while shade was shielding them, a flowered meadow;  
 so I saw many troops of *splendors* here  
 lit from above by burning rays of light,  
 but where those rays began was not in sight.

[*Italics mine*]

Stanza 16(ll.136-144) introduces two Greek myths; “Hyacinth” and “Narcissus”. Both Hyacinthus and Narcissus are transformed into a flower, just as the figure of Adonais is throughout the elegy.

Hyacinthus was a youth beloved by Phoebus Apollo, who mourned him when jealous Zephyrus caused his death. Apollo turned Hyacinthus into a flower. One of the themes of “Hyacinth” is jealousy. Shelley might have been jealous for his contemporary poet Keats for his talent.

When the nymph Echo was rebuffed by Narcissus, whom she loved, she faded into an echo of sounds; Narcissus scorned Echo, fell in love with his own reflection and was transformed into a flower. Shelley’s reaction to Keats’s death is somehow narcissistic, because Shelley sees Keats as a reflection of his own sense of martyrdom and partly attaches his affections to himself.

## 8. Life-Death-Rebirth Cycle of Nature: The Second Movement

The second movement opens with an account of the life-death-rebirth cycle of nature. It distinguishes vitality from spirit, or mind, the former passing through an endless circle of renewal and the latter ending in annihilation. “Change” is now understood to be the law by which nature forever renews herself, rebuilding life from death.

In stanza 18-19 (ll.154-171), the elegist is tracing the course whereby in the world of matter and motion organic life renews itself, which is contrasted with the linear termination of the individual



human life. The vital power bursts from the heart of earth itself and organic things, thirsting for their earthly vitality, diffuse their material selves among other living things as odor, color and taste.

Ah woe is me! Winter is come and gone,  
 But grief returns with the revolving year;  
 The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;  
 .....  
 Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean  
*A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst*  
*As it has ever done, with change and motion,*  
 From the great morning of the world when first  
 God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed,  
 The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;... [*Italics mine*]

E. R. Wasserman points out that the images of stanza 43 (ll.379-387) in the last movement is the reinterpretation of stanza 19 (the second half of the quotation above), in which the subject is not the perpetual cycle of nature, but the resurrection of the spirit.<sup>25</sup>

In stanza 20 (ll.172-180), the living “flowers” no longer mock the corpse beneath”, for they will decay but only to become life again. In *Adonais*, the elegist repeatedly figures flowers emerging from soil that is nourished by a grave.

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender  
 Exhales itself in *flowers* of gentle breath;  
 Like *incarnations of the stars, when splendour*  
*Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death*  
*And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;... [Italics mine]*

In this stanza, the living “flowers” no longer mock the corpse beneath” as they did in stanza 2, for they will decay but only to become life again. The flowers “mock the merry worm” instead, because in nature’s eternal cycle all things change and nothing is annihilated. Flowers are likened to “incarnations of the stars, when splendour/Is changed to fragrance”(ll.174-175). While flowers represent the principle of organic life, stars represent that of absolute life. Thus, this stanza is in a striking contrast to the lines in stanza 2, “...Rekindled all the fading melodies,/With which, like flowers that mock the corse beneath, /He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of death”(ll.16-18).

Stanza 29 (ll.253-261) recalls stanza 4-5, with their account of the fates of John Milton and other lesser poets; on the other hand, it looks forward to stanza 52 (ll.460-468), in which will culminate the imagery of light and the theme of its distortion by the moist atmosphere.<sup>26</sup>

"*The sun* comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;  
He sets, and each ephemeral insect then  
Is gathered into death without a dawn,  
And *the immortal stars* awake again;... [*Italics mine*]

According to P. H. Butter, the “sun” in this stanza represents the great poet during his lifetime; the reptiles those who are dependent on him, whether as critics who dim his light or as imitators who share it; the stars the poets who have achieved lasting fame, whose light was temporarily obscured by the splendour of the new poet, who after death will become one of them.<sup>27</sup> D. H. Reiman explains the simile as follows: “In human history, a supreme imagination like Byron dominates his era, and lesser writers (like Thomas Moore) who imitate him attain a derivative popularity while he is in vogue. When the influence of the single “godlike mind” wanes, the works of the ephemeral poets disappear from view, and there emerge the “kindred lamps” of excellent but unappreciated writers whose light had been obscured by the popular luminary.”<sup>28</sup>

Stanza 31-34, so called Shelley’s self-portrait, is abundant in natural images, in which death feeds life and life illumines death. In stanza 31 (ll.271-279), the elegist, “one frail Form”(i.e. Shelley) is compared to the hunter Actaeon because he had “gazed on Nature’s naked loveliness” just like Actaeon had seen Diana naked and turned into a stag, after which he was chased and killed by his own hounds. In other words, “one frail Form” knew the nature’s secret beauty very well, or too well.

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,  
A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
Whose thunder is its knell; he, as I guess,  
*Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,*  
*Actaeon-like,* and now he fled astray  
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,  
And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,  
Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey. [*Italics mine*]

In stanza 32 (ll.280-288), the elegist is then compared to a leopard, sacred to Diunysus. M. H. Scrivener points out that the “one frail Form” is an oxymoron of strength and weakness: frail, but like a leopard; like a storm, but feeble; expiring, but beautiful and swift.<sup>29</sup>

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

The life can burn in blood, even while the heart may break. [*Italics mine*]

The image of the smiling “killing sun” that murders “the withering flower” may allow various kinds of interpretations. The present writer assumes that the “sun” in this stanza is the critics who, Shelley believed, had crushed Keats’s spirit. The “flower” is mainly Keats as in the other parts of the poem, but also Shelley in this self-portrait section. It is not so simple, however, because from the viewpoint of Keats, Shelley might have been one of those critics, who praised and criticized Keats at the same time.

The images of flowers also dominate stanza 33 (ll.289-297). The Poet in this stanza is just like “pansies” and “violets” blooming in a cemetery in spring.

*His head was bound with pansies overblown,  
And faded violets, white, and pied, and blue;  
And a light spear topped with a cypress cone,  
Round whose rude shaft dark ivy tresses grew  
Yet dripping with the forest's noonday dew,  
Vibrated, as the ever-beating heart  
Shook the weak hand that grasped it; of that crew  
He came the last, neglected and apart;*

A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart. [*Italics mine*]

The “one frail Form” is wearing the apparel of a devotee of Bacchus, whose image is earthly rather than heavenly. In the last line, he is like “A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter’s dart.

The hunter, a leopard, the withering flower, pansies, faded violets, a herd-abandoned deer — they are all in the life-death-rebirth cycle of nature, in the world of mortality. There is no symbol of immortality and eternity at all in Shelley’s self-portrait.

### 9. Death as Access to Eternity: The Third Movement

In the last movement, the elegist, or the persona of the poet, reverses the entire perspective of the first and second movement. “Dust returns to dust”, but the “pure spirit” of Adonais has become “A portion of the Eternal”. But even in this movement, we recognize the elegist’s ambivalent attitude toward death and immortality. Beginning with stanza 38 (ll.334-342), Shelley develops the Platonic theme of death and immortality.

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

“He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead” means if Adonais sleeps, he has lost all beings and if he wakes he exists in the true reality. Therefore, “enduring dead” is ambiguous. This is an example of the Poet’s uncertain, hesitant and ambivalent attitude toward death and immortality. In this stanza, “the pure spirit” of Adonais shall flow/Back to the burning fountain whence it came. The image of “the burning fountain” recalls “Quench within their burning bed/Thy fiery tears” in stanza 3, ll.21-22, an image of combination of fire and water”. J. A. Notopoulos points out that “this stanza is an epitome of *Phaedo*, 80-81, where the body dissolves to dust and the spirit returns to its immortal source, here described...as a “burning fountain”...The Platonism of this passage is refracted through the Plotinian doctrine of emanation of souls from the one...Shelley may have been attracted to the Plotinian doctrine of emanation and the fountain from Coleridge’s poetry, where they figure prominently”.<sup>30</sup> “The concept of spirit as a fiery emanation flowing from the divine fire appears in the writings of the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (*Enneads*, IV. iii. ll.9-10).<sup>31</sup>

Stanza 39 (ll.343-351) is the turning point of the elegy. Now the death of Adonais is seen in an entirely different context. Adonais “is not dead”, and it is “we” who are dead.

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 phantoms an unprofitable strife,*  
*And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife*  
*Invulnerable nothings.*—... [Italics mine]

From the viewpoint of eternity, earthly life is a kind of death in comparison with the immortal life. Ultimate reality is neither matter nor vitality, but spirit. Death is access to eternity. Shelley might have gotten this idea directly or indirectly from Plato's *Gorgias* (*Γοργίας*), 492e-493a:

[Σωκράτης] ἀλλὰ μὲν δὴ καὶ ὥς γε σὺ λέγεις δεινὸς ὁ βίος. οὐ γάρ τοι θαυμάζοιμ' ἂν εἰ Εὐριπίδης ἀληθῆ ἐν τοῖσδε λέγει, λέγων—“τίς δ' οἶδεν, εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἐστὶ καταθανεῖν, τὸ καταθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν; /καὶ ἡμεῖς τῷ ὄντι ἴσως τέθναμεν: ἤδη γάρ του ἔγωγε καὶ ἤκουσα τῶν σοφῶν ὡς νῦν ἡμεῖς τέθναμεν καὶ τὸ μὲν σῶμά ἐστὶν ἡμῖν σῆμα, τῆς δὲ ψυχῆς τοῦτο ἐν ᾧ ἐπιθυμῖαι εἰσὶ τυγχάνει ὄν οἷον ἀναπειθεσθαι καὶ μεταπίπτειν ἄνω κάτω, καὶ τοῦτο ἄρα τις μυθολογῶν κομπὸς ἀνὴρ, ἴσως Σικελὸς τις ἢ Ἰταλικός, παράγων τῷ ὀνόματι διὰ τὸ πιθανόν τε καὶ πειστικὸν ὠνόμασε πίθον, τοὺς δὲ ἀνοήτους ἀμυήτους,<sup>32</sup>

[Socrates] Well, well, as you say, life is strange. For I tell you I should not wonder if Euripides' words were true, when he says: “*Who knows if to live is to be dead, and to be dead, to live? /and we really, it may be, are dead*; in fact I once heard sages say that we are now dead, and the body is our tomb, and the part of the soul in which we have desires is liable to be over-persuaded and to vacillate to and fro, and so some smart fellow, a Sicilian, I daresay, or Italian, made a fable in which—by a play of words—he named this part, as being so impressionable and persuadable, a jar, and the thoughtless he called uninitiate:

[Italics mine]

In stanza 41 (ll.361-369), “dew” (water or moisture) represents organic life and “splendour” (light) represents eternal life. At the crucial point in the poem, the elegist commands “young Dawn” to turn the dew to splendour and bids the “faint flowers”, “the abandoned Earth”, and “the joyous stars” not to mourn for Adonais.

He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he;  
 Mourn not for Adonais. —Thou young Dawn,  
 Turn all thy dew to splendour, for from thee  
 The spirit thou lamentest is not gone;  
 Ye caverns and ye forests, cease to moan!  
 Cease ye faint flowers and fountains, and thou Air

Which like a mourning veil thy scarf hadst thrown  
 O'er the abandoned Earth, now leave it bare  
 Even to *the joyous stars* which smile on its despair! [*Italics mine*]

In stanza 42 (ll.370-378), Shelley sees Adonais as “made one with Nature”. That is, the physical elements of Adonais’ body are no longer a part of nature. The conception is pantheistic, like the early poems of W. Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge. That “Power”(l.375) is the ultimate Power, which wields the world with love.

He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
 His voice in all her music, from the moan  
 Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;  
 He is a presence to be felt and known  
 In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,  
 Spreading itself where'er *that Power* may move  
 Which has withdrawn his being to its own;...[*Italics mine*]

Adonais is considered as a portion of the ideal beauty in stanza 43 (ll.379-387). The phrase the “one Spirit's plastic stress”(l.381) suggests an influence of Ralph Cudworth (1618-1688). “Central to Cudworth’s metaphysics is the Platonist principle that mind is first in the order of nature”.<sup>33</sup> Cudworth’s “most important debt is to Plotinus, especially for his idea of unconscious living nature, and his conception of sympathy as a kind of bonding agent in the universe”.<sup>34</sup>

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

This stanza recalls stanza 19 (ll.163-171) in the second movement, but now the subject is restoration of the soul to the One, not the reawakening of the vital power. The “quicken life” (l.164) has become reidentified as the “one Spirit’s plastic stress”(l.381). Its spiritual beauty and

power is now bursting from the “Many” (l.460) so that the “One”(l.460) may be reflected back “into the Heaven’s light”(l.387) whence it came.<sup>35</sup> The phrase “one Spirit's plastic stress” reminds us of R. Cudworth’s hypothesis of “Plastic Nature”, which he posits as intermediary casual entity between God and the natural world. This is contained in a long section of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*(1678) entitled “Digression concerning the Plastick Life of Nature”.<sup>36</sup>

J. A. Notopoulos points out that a possible source of the “one Spirit’s plastic stress” in Shelley’s *Adonais* is S. T. Coleridge’s sonnet *To Rev. W. L. Bowles*.<sup>37</sup> In the second version of it Coleridge describes “a strange mysterious PLEASURE”(l.11) brooding over mind “As the great SPIRIT erst with plastic sweep/Mov’d on the darkness of the unform’d deep”(ll.13-14).<sup>38</sup> The present writer suggests that there is another example in Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp”, in which he wrote; “Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze” infusing minds and perceived objects as “the soul of each, and God of all” (ll.47-48). J. A. Notopoulos assumes that “Wordsworth and Coleridge gave beautiful poetic expression to Plastic Nature, and a comparison of Shelley’s lines in *Adonais* with their versions of this doctrine makes it likely that Shelley absorbed this poetical idea from his contemporary poets whom he read and admired”.<sup>39</sup>

In the last twelve stanzas of *Adonais*, we can see the elegist’s ambivalent attitude toward death and immortality in the use of veil image and its variants.

In stanza 44 (ll.388-396), *Adonais* and other creative spirits are now called “The splendours”. We are already familiar with this word because we’ve already seen it in the Epigram from Plato and stanza 12, l.100.

*The splendours* of the firmament of time  
 May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;  
*Like stars* to their appointed height they climb  
 And *death is a low mist which cannot blot*  
*The brightness it may veil...* [Italics mine]

*Adonais* and other creative spirits are like “stars”, because they may be eclipsed, but are not extinguished. In the first movement, “Another Splendour” in stanza 12 (l.100) was used to designate one of *Adonais*’ mental creations.<sup>40</sup>

The elegist seems to dread the consequences of success in the pursuit of the absolute. When the elegist says “death is a low mist which cannot blot/The brightness it may veil”, the “brightness” predominates over “death”. Even though “veil” is used as a verb, it is Shelley’s symbol for earthly life. In other words, the elegist is not ready to face “death” in this stanza.

In stanza 49 (ll.433-441), the image of Rome deliberately intertwines “Paradise” and “grave”, life and death, and “flowering weeds” and “fragrant co[r]pses”.

Go thou to Rome,—at once the Paradise,  
 The grave, the city, and the wilderness;  
 And where its wrecks like shattered mountains rise,  
 And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses dress  
 The bones of Desolation's nakedness  
 Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead  
 Thy footsteps to a slope of green access  
 Where, *like an infant's smile, over the dead,*  
*A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread. [Italics mine]*

“A light of laughing flowers”, a combination of “light” and “flowers” indicates that “flowers” in this context have an attribute of immortality, which are closer to “stars”.

In stanza 51 (ll.451-459), the elegist expresses his own death wish.<sup>41</sup> Some readers might not be able to accept the elegist’s invitation: “What Adonais is, why fear we to become?”

Here pause: these graves are all too young as yet  
 To have outgrown the sorrow which consigned  
 Its charge to each; and if the seal is set,  
 Here, on one fountain of a mourning mind,  
 Break it not thou! too surely shalt thou find  
 Thine own well full, if thou returnest home,  
 Of tears and gall. From the world's bitter wind  
 Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.  
*What Adonais is, why fear we to become? [Italics mine]*

D. H. Reiman suggests that “the persona of the Poet and the reader participate, at different levels, in the “progressive revelation” of the poem as together they move from sorrow at the death of Adonais to a realization that he is better off than they are; in the end, the Poet parts company from his reader by deciding to pursue death, while the reader remains behind in doubt and uncertainty. Only by understanding the different conclusions reached by the persona of the poet, the imagined reader whom the Poet addresses, and the “pardlike Spirit beautiful and swift”...can one avoid over-simplifying the poem into a pat generalization that death is better than life”.<sup>42</sup>

Stanza 52 (ll.460-468) is the most famous stanza in *Adonais*. The first line “The One remains, the many change and pass” summarizes the entire poem. As matter, the “many” will “pass”(The first



movement), as animation, they will “change”(The second movement). But “One”, the soul of man is eternal, being changeless. Therefore, Adonais will awake forever(The Third movement).

*The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,  
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!  
Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,  
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak. [Italics mine]*

J. A. Notopoulos suggests that “the first line is a beautiful epigrammatic statement of the Platonic doctrine, without resort to imagery and that Shelley restates the doctrine in terms of Plato’s own imagery and metaphor...the third and fourth lines express the Platonic thought of the first two lines anew through an image which Shelley fashioned out of his own imagination and traditional imagery...in lines 462-463 Shelley interprets physical phenomena (Life) in terms of Platonic metaphysics; and finally he fuses both of these into an image which is polar in character, interpreting the mental and physical in terms of each other. The imagery in which Shelley chose to express this is partly derived from the operations of his own mind, partly from traditional imagery”.<sup>43</sup> He also points out that “Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass,/Stains the white radiance of Eternity”(ll.462-463) derives from Canto XXIX (ll.142-145) of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia, Paradiso*:<sup>44</sup>

Vedi l’eccelso omai e la larghezza  
de l’eterno valor, *poscia che tanti  
speculi fatti s’ha in che si spezza,  
uno manendo in sé come davanti.*<sup>45</sup>

By now you see the height, you see the breadth,  
of the eternal Goodness: *It has made  
so many mirrors, which divide Its light,  
but, as before, Its own Self still is One.*

[Italics mine]

The present writer points out that the “dome of many-coloured glass”(l.462), a brilliant variation of Shelley’s veil image, attracts the elegist, or Shelley himself more than “the white radiance of Eternity”(l.463). The last stanza (ll. 487-495) begins with the image of voyaging out, but “the inmost veil of Heaven” (l.493) blocks the elegist’s way to the eternal soul of Adonais.

The breath whose might I have invoked in song

Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,  
 Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
 The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!  
 I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar:  
 Whilst burning through *the inmost veil of Heaven*,  
 The soul of Adonais, *like a star*,  
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. [*Italics mine*]

D. H. Reiman points out that the first four lines in the quotation above echo but recast the idea of the opening lines of Canto II (ll.1-6) of Dante's *La Divina Commedia, Paradiso*:<sup>46</sup>

<p><i>O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,          desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti          dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,          tornate a riveder li vostri liti:          non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,          perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.</i><sup>47</sup></p>	<p><i>O you who are within your little bark,          eager to listen, following behind          my ship that, singing, crosses to deep seas,          turn back to see your shores again: do not          attempt to sail the seas I sail; you may,          by losing sight of me, be left astray.</i></p>
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[*Italics mine*]

In the quotation above, Dante exhorts his readers to consider well whether they are prepared to continue following his ship (i.e. his poem *Paradiso*) before beginning the account of his journey upward through the heavens.

M. H. Scrivener interprets the last stanzas to mean that “Shelley is carried toward suicide, which he nevertheless refuses to accept”. Scrivener emphasizes the fact that Shelley is driven there by forces outside his control.<sup>48</sup> A. Epstein suggests that “Even at the last moment, a veil still separates Adonais from Shelley...Shelley knows that Keats does not *actually* twinkle in the sky, and neither would he himself if he were to join him in death...Keats remains only within this poem, as a trope, as “Adonais”, for what may possibly be eternity”.<sup>49</sup> R. Woodman argues that “Shelley committed psychic suicide in *Adonais*”.<sup>50</sup> “R. H. Fogle describes this stanza as follows: “The soul of Adonais is at once a strong wind which blows the bark of the spirit into dark, fearful waters and a fixed star which guides the mariner, comfortably like the beacon of a lighthouse. Yet before this light can be reached the poet must pierce not one, but many veils”.<sup>51</sup> R. H. Fogle might be exaggerating when he says “many veils”, though.

The present writer asserts that even in the last stanza of the poem, the elegist hesitates to get into the world of death and immortality. In most of his poems Shelley is more attracted to earthly life and beautiful nature than immortal life, and even *Adonais* is not an exception.

## 10. The Least Imperfect Poem of Shelley

The present writer asserts that *Adonais* culminates in stanza 49-55, and consistency and unity of the poem is attained by Shelley's original use of key images and symbolism throughout the poem.

The key images in *Adonais* are star-flower images. A star is a symbol of the eternal soul in Platonism/Neoplatonism. The images of flowers at the beginning of the poem become stars in the last movement. That is, in the first movement, the flowers, the symbol of organic life, vainly defies death, but in the second movement, is renewed by the impulse death gives to life. And in the third movement, it turns out to be earthly, mortal manifestation of a star, a symbol of eternal soul. In the last stanzas of the poem, the images of the veil, which make distinction between life and death, reflect the Poet's ambivalent attitude toward death and immortality. In addition to that, throughout the poem there is a recurrent opposition of two nature images like some other poems of Shelley: light, or fire, the life symbol; and moisture, or mist, the symbol of mortality.

Finally the present writer suggests that one of the reasons why Shelley said *Adonais* was the least imperfect of his compositions is that he had succeeded in combining Platonic metaphysics and his own imagery fashioned out of his own imagination. In his *A Defence of Poetry*, which was written only a few months before *Adonais*, Shelley declares that the "poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, *which unites the modern and antient world*" [*Italics mine*].<sup>52</sup> The present writer assumes that the poetic imagery in *Adonais* is partly derived from the operations of his own mind, partly from the traditional imagery of Platonism.

C. Baker points out that *Prometheus Unbound* is "a very imperfect poem" because he did not combine Love(Asia) and Eternity(Demogorgon) in the drama. In *Adonais*, on the other hand, Shelley "had evolved a new metaphysical conception in which Love and Eternity together became the "One" which remains while the many change and pass".<sup>53</sup> By associating Keats's spirit with Platonic immortality, Shelley successfully attained a purer expression of Platonism than any other poems he had ever written.

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