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# “Flowers that Mock the Corse Beneath”: Shelley’s *Adonais*, Keats, and Poetic Influence

ANDREW EPSTEIN

## I

AT the center of *Adonais*, Shelley’s tormented elegy for Keats, lies a paradoxical self-portrait that suggests the elegist’s attitude towards his subject is much more conflicted and contradictory than many readers have recognized. When asked the question “who art thou?” Shelley’s double does not answer, and then

with a sudden hand  
Made bare his branded and ensanguined brow,  
Which was like Cain’s or Christ’s—Oh! that it should be so!<sup>1</sup>

While Shelley’s contemporaries greeted this self-revelation with outrage, seeing it as blasphemous and in the poorest taste, Shelley himself defended his strange yoking of evil and good: “the introduction of the name of *Christ* as antithesis to *Cain* is surely any thing but irreverence or sarcasm.”<sup>2</sup> Though the poet clearly thought the opposition pivotal to the meaning of his poem, critics have never adequately explained the reference.<sup>3</sup> The irreconcilable contradiction, however,

1. *Adonais*, lines 305–306. All quotations of *Adonais* are from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 390–406.

2. With this remark, Shelley responded to John Taaffe’s criticism of this “obnoxious expression” by refusing to change it, telling him “I think when you read the passage again, you will acquit it of any such tendency.” In *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), II, 306; hereafter cited as *Letters*. One contemporary reviewer called it “a passage of memorable and ferocious blasphemy,” “daring profanation,” and added “We are scarcely satisfied that even to quote such passages may not be criminal. The subject is too repulsive for us to proceed even expressing our disgust” (in *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James E. Barcus [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975], p. 299; and cf. p. 306).

3. For discussions of the Cain image that fail to take into account the fratricidal implications I will be stressing, see, for example, Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 345; Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (London: Mac-

is crucial to a poem framed upon paradox: in fact, it is emblematic of the ambivalence that tears at the very fabric of the poem. As such, it reveals Shelley's double conception of his role: in composing this memorial for the fallen Keats, he sees himself, simultaneously, as a Christ-like redeemer and his brother's jealous murderer, a preserver and a destroyer. Critics have read the poem, despite its unsettling "want of repose,"<sup>4</sup> as a glorious tribute that "celebrates the imaginative power" of Keats, a successful "work of mourning" by "a true mourner" that "is a triumph of his mourning imagination," "a poem of exhilarating, mature joy," a poem that builds to "visionary consolation" for deep sorrow, or reenacts the reunion of Shelley's "soul with the One"; they have seen it as either a poem that portrays Shelley's "permanent achievement of a personal transcendence" among "a pantheon of apotheosized poets," or one that blazes with "a triumph of human despair" as its author commits "psychic suicide."<sup>5</sup> But such critics have yet to explore or explain fully the poem's carefully constructed *irresolution*, a perpetual undecidability that deliberately resists such readings. This is because the many excellent and careful analyses of the poem have overlooked both Shelley's fierce ambivalence towards his "brother" Keats and the dimensions of his struggle with the conflict of poetic influence and originality.<sup>6</sup>

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millan, 1981), p. 192; Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 252; one essay that does take into account a wide range of associations implicit in the Cain reference is Parks C. Hunter, Jr.'s "The Equivocal Cain Images in Shelley's *Adonais*," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 24 (1973), 12–15, but Hunter also overlooks the possibility that Cain implies Shelley's jealousy towards Keats and his guilt for being, in some way, Keats's destroyer as well as his redeemer.

4. Shelley's contemporary, Joseph Severn, complained about "the want of repose" in the elegy for his dear friend Keats: "you are continually longing to know what he will be at" (quoted in *Letters*, II, 366).

5. These quotations are taken, respectively, from Donald H. Reiman, *Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 118; Peter Sacks, "Last Clouds: A Reading of *Adonais*," *Studies in Romanticism*, 23 (Fall 1984), 380, 387, 400; Stuart Curran, "Adonais in context," in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), 180; Ronald E. Becht, "Shelley's *Adonais*: Formal Design and The Lyric Speaker's Crisis of Imagination," *Studies in Philology*, 78 (Spring 1981), 194; Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 484; Harold Bloom, *Visionary Company*, p. 349; and Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 158.

6. Some of the excellent studies of *Adonais* that I have found useful include: Wasserman's influential chapter, pp. 462–502; Woodman's chapter in *The Apocalyptic Vision*, reprinted in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 659–75; Angela Leighton, "Deconstruction Criticism and Shelley's *Adonais*," in *Shelley Revalued*, ed. Everest, 147–64; Lloyd Abbey, *Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 294–318; Stephen C.

While the notion that an uneasy bond existed between the two poets has long been a critical commonplace, scholars have assumed that the source of tension in the friendship lay predominantly with Keats's class-based insecurities and resentment of the aristocratic Shelley; they have therefore shied away from Shelley's even more profound anxieties about Keats as a poetic rival and have underestimated his preoccupation with Keats's late poems.<sup>7</sup> This standard sense of the relationship between the two poets has, for the most part, led many readers to disregard the strength of the poem's contradictions, the complexity of Shelley's response to Keats's poems within *Adonais*, and the extent of his general anxieties about poetic rivalry and influence.<sup>8</sup>

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Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences*, pp. 245–60; Ronald Tetreault, *The Poetry of Life: Shelley and Literary Form* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 221–34; William A. Ulmer, "Adonais and the Death of Poetry," *Studies in Romanticism*, 32.3 (Fall 1993), 425–51. An invaluable resource for any study of the elegy is Anthony Kerr, *Shelley's Adonais: A Critical Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), including a concise overview of the critical opinion, pp. 119–35. Some insightful recent essays on Shelley include James A. W. Heffernan, "Shelley's Consumption of Keats," *Studies in Romanticism*, 34 (Fall 1984), 295–315; Christine Gallant, *Shelley's Ambivalence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), esp. pp. 140–53; Stuart Curran, "Adonais in context"; and Susan Wolfson, "Keats Enters History: Autopsy, *Adonais*, and the Fame of Keats," in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17–45. For an example of a recent interpretation that typically ignores Shelley's ambivalence towards Keats as a rival poet, see Peter Sacks's ingenious but ultimately misguided article, "Last Clouds: A Reading of *Adonais*." Sacks reads the poem in psychoanalytic terms and outlines the various stages of grief the mourning poet moves through as he attempts to accommodate the loss of his love-object. Sacks argues that Shelley navigates between normal and pathological grief (mourning and melancholia) for his beloved Keats, but does not recognize that one of the major tensions of the poem is to what extent Shelley is mourning for Keats at all.

7. The typical understanding of the Keats-Shelley relationship descends from Leigh Hunt's estimation in his *Autobiography*: "Keats, being a little too sensitive on the score of his origin, felt inclined to see in every man of birth a sort of natural enemy" (quoted in Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years*, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974], p. 422). This notion that Keats was fearful and resentful of Shelley, and that Shelley was benevolently if patronizingly interested in Keats and his work, has been perpetuated by many accounts. See, for example, Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1940), II, 231; Donald H. Reiman, "Keats and Shelley: Personal and Literary Relations," in *Shelley and His Circle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), v, 399–427. An editorial note prefacing one of Keats's letters to Shelley in the widely-used anthology *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), reveals important assumptions about the relationship: "Shelley, Keats's senior by three years, had advantages of social position and education that Keats could not but be conscious of, and, for all his difficulties, he was better established as a poet than Keats, who, in a few references to Shelley in his letters, shows a certain touchiness about him" (p. 785). An implicit class bias colors such an understanding of the friendship and textual interaction, as it is usually assumed that Keats had more to fear in Shelley, ignoring the obvious signs that Shelley was equally preoccupied with Keats as a "rival who will far surpass me" (*Letters*, II, 240).

8. There are important exceptions, articles that at least address Shelley's relationship to Keats. See Curran's "Adonais in context," Heffernan's "Adonais: Shelley's Consumption of Keats," and Wolfson's "Keats Enters History." One other exception is Gallant's study of the ambivalence that underlies

Because he is torn by such conflicting impulses, Shelley deliberately structures *Adonais* upon a logic of equivocation and doubleness. I suggest that this ambiguity, the "ore" Shelley pours into the fissures of his poem, is a deliberate response to Keats's sharp piece of advice in 1820: "You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore."<sup>9</sup> Keats's admonishment, while probably bruising Shelley's pride, challenged and goaded Shelley to write his most densely "loaded" poem, *Adonais*.<sup>10</sup> In it, contradictions are introduced and left unresolved, intertextual echoes enter only to be subverted or revised, paradoxical figurative language continually undermines apparent assertions, and images are suspended in "or" constructions (such as in the references to Cain *or* Christ, "he wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead," and so on; lines 306, 336). While there have been many compelling studies of the problematic nature of Shelleyan imagery, more attention must be given to Shelley's intentional use of equivocal, undecidable rhetoric as a way of dramatizing the tense play of conflicting motives and attitudes.<sup>11</sup>

Shelley's major works. Gallant looks, as I do, at "the turbulence and unease beneath the surface" of Shelley's texts; however, she uses depth psychology and Jungian archetypes to help her "trace the more subterranean levels of Shelley's work" (pp. 10–11). Though she, unlike most critics, does note how Shelley's ambivalence "showed itself in his buried envy, and concomitant desire to spoil goodness, that persisted towards his friend Byron, and to a lesser degree, Keats," she reads *Adonais* as a wholly laudatory tribute to Keats that Shelley creates out of guilt for his *former* ambivalence about Keats during his life. It will be clear how sharply my reading differs from Gallant's, as it focuses on Shelley's persistent, deep ambivalence towards Keats *within* the elegy itself.

9. Letter to Shelley, August 16, 1820, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 390.

10. Shelley frequently referred to his elegy on Keats as his most self-consciously "artistic" poem: just after he wrote *Adonais*, Shelley called it "a highly wrought *piece of art*, perhaps better in point of composition than any thing I have written" (*Letters*, II, 294). 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" and "a favourite with me" (*Letters*, II, 299, 434).

11. Among the many other studies of Shelley's unstable figurative language, I have particularly benefited from Stephen C. Behrendt's discussion of Shelley's "multistability" in *Shelley and His Audiences* which resembles what I am calling Shelley's equivocal structure and rhetoric in *Adonais* (p. 2). Behrendt's major concern is how Shelley uses multistability as a rhetorical strategy in order to reach multiples audiences. Many critics have written diversely and usefully on Shelley's ambiguous, self-divided, and rigorously unstable figurative language, as well as about his complex attitudes toward rhetoric. See, for example, Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts*; William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984); Andrea Leighton, "Deconstruction Criticism and Shelley's *Adonais*"; Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process*; Ronald Tetreault's *The Poetry of Life*; Peter Sacks, "Last Clouds"; Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured" in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Bloom, et al. (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 39–73; and J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, pp. 217–53.

The pervasive undecidability that colors *Adonais*'s content, structure, and imagery stems as much from Shelley's relationship with Keats's poems and his ambivalent feelings about Keats and poetic independence, as from Shelley's characteristic penchant for unstable and self-contentious rhetorical figures.

In his letters and in his elegy for Keats, Shelley demonstrates a keen, though often submerged, awareness that strong contemporary poets, indeed "rival" artists and their texts, can simultaneously inspire a poet to further creation *and* exert great pressure upon his or her independent poetic voice.<sup>12</sup> Recent theories of influence, such as Harold Bloom's, tend to emphasize the anxiety a strong "father" poet engenders within the psyche of an "ephebe." Such theories—unlike Shelley's own notions about influence—often neglect the complex mixture of affinity and resistance that characterizes the relationship between contemporaries or "siblings," such as Keats and Shelley. But Shelley is attuned to how poets both depend upon and fear their strongest contemporaries (as well as their predecessors); thus, he self-consciously inserts *Adonais* into a long tradition of elegies that mourn the loss of poetic "brothers"—such as Bion's for Moschus, Spenser's for Sidney, Milton's for Edward King—and that frequently focus on problems of poetic fraternity, immortality, and originality. Bloom isolates the fears of creative failure that lie at the heart of this elegiac tradition, which may help explain Shelley's decision to use and reinvent this outdated form for his poem:

in a poet's lament for his precursor, or more frequently for another poet of his own generation, the poet's own deepest anxieties tend to be uncovered. . . . The great pastoral elegies, indeed all major elegies for poets, do not express grief but center upon their composer's creative anxieties.<sup>13</sup>

*Adonais*, as we will see, is driven by Shelley's "deepest anxieties"; it does not so much express grief for Keats's death as dramatize the cre-

12. In one letter, discussed below, Shelley refers to Keats as "a rival who will far surpass me" (*Letters*, II, 240). It should be noted that Shelley's notions about poetic rivalry are played out with similar intensity and insecurity in his relations with Lord Byron, among other contemporaries. However, Shelley and Keats were both critically attacked and virtually unread, in comparison to the renowned Byron, so the affinities between them are more pronounced and more problematic.

13. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 150–51. Though Bloom does see the "creative anxieties" at the heart of pastoral elegy, his focus is still more trained on the elegist's feeling of inescapable belatedness in relation to his strong precursors. For Bloom, the peer figures more as a stand-in for the "real" competitor.

ative crisis caused by the simultaneous distress and exhilaration Shelley feels as he attempts to commemorate a rival poet and to question his own poetic power. Although Bloom is correct about the unrest and self-doubt at the heart of the pastoral elegiac tradition, he reductively sees *Adonais* in particular as assuaging its "composer's creative anxieties" by ultimately "offer[ing] oblivion" (a conclusion my reading of the poem's irresolvable contradictions will not support). Like so many other critics, Bloom also underestimates Shelley's uneasiness about Keats by calling him "by far the most generous strong poet of the post-Enlightenment" in "his attitude towards precursors and contemporaries" (151–52). What Bloom and his particular theory of influence (through his preoccupation with vertical, rather than lateral, poetic influences) fail to realize is the strength of the simultaneous attraction and repulsion the figure, and *figures*, of Keats holds for his poetic "brother" Shelley.<sup>14</sup> As we will see, *Adonais* is an extremely self-conscious work that recognizes—with profound ambivalence—its debt to poetic predecessors and to Keats's poetry in particular, and is therefore obsessed with the paradoxical fact that the creative act demands appropriation and originality at the same time.

In his letters and in *Adonais*, Shelley relies on key tropes that figure eating and being eaten, growth springing from decay, and parasitic feeding and destruction, in order to explore these dynamics of intertextuality, the relationship between new texts and the old, living poets and the dead.<sup>15</sup> As J. Hillis Miller has demonstrated, the fact that

14. Bloom's comments on Shelley and *Adonais*, (in passing in *Anxiety of Influence* and more fully in *The Visionary Company* and *A Map of Misreading*) mistakenly cast *Adonais* as a poem that is "beyond ambition" (*Anxiety of Influence*, p. 151); convinced that nothing problematic colors the Shelley-Keats relationship beyond Keats's insecurities, Bloom never recognizes Shelley's deep unease about Keats as a rival, and never attends to the complicated intertextual relationship—replete with swervings, misprisions, and tropings—between the poems of Shelley and Keats. Bloom focuses predominantly on Shelley's anxious revision of Wordsworth and Milton; this attention to precursors in prior generations overlooks the more subtle interactions between contemporaries (see "In the Shadow of Milton," in *A Map of Misreading* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1975], pp. 144–59). In such tense "sibling" relationships, poets are more likely to see themselves as allies and literary comrades, to be quietly jealous as well as directly competitive and adversarial, to be critical of one another, to echo one another only to twist or trope the friend's words as a way of maintaining one's individuality.

15. A remarkably pertinent discussion of the ambiguity inherent in such rhetorical figures, in J. Hillis Miller's "The Critic as Host," sheds light on the type of dynamic relationship between living and dead poets I am suggesting is central to *Adonais*. Surprisingly, Miller does not apply his analysis of this figure to *Adonais*, but focuses mainly on *The Triumph of Life* and *Epipsychidion*. As a result, he misses the example of a poem obsessively concerned with the uncertain relationship between *feeding on* and *being nourished* by other poets and poems.

all texts (especially self-consciously allusive poems like Shelley's) cite, quote, echo and allude to other texts within their own structure raises certain paradoxes. As Miller argues, and as evidenced by the tensions within *Adonais*, it is never fully clear whether a text successfully encloses, confines and feeds on the texts it echoes, or if it is ultimately commanded, poisoned, or undone by the poems it alludes to; in fact, both situations perpetually co-exist. Much of the unrest in *Adonais* is due to Shelley's sensitivity to this perpetually ambiguous relationship between the echoed and the echoer. Poems like Shelley's are "inhabited . . . by a long chain of parasitical presences—echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts"; thus, *Adonais* is a perfect example of a text that features a dramatic and contentious dialogue between self and other, new poem and old:

the previous text is both the ground of the new one and something the new one must annihilate by incorporating it, turning it into ghostly insubstantiality, so that the new poem may perform its possible-impossible task of becoming its own ground. The new poem both needs the old texts and must destroy them. It is both parasitical on them, feeding ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it is the sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home. . . . (Miller, p. 225)

Attention to the paradoxical interplay between 'that which feeds upon' and 'that which invites another in to be sustained' will help explain why and how Shelley invites Keats into his "home" as a guest, both literally (when he invites the ailing Keats to Pisa to be cared for and "nourished") and figuratively, when he summons Keats and his poems into the "domicile" or "abode" of his elegy (*Letters*, II, 240). Once inside the host's home, Keats becomes both food and poison to the poet. Shelley "unmans" Keats by troping his rival's words and ideas, and by transforming his threatening guest into myth and image: into "Adonais" (a frail, auspicious "nursling" killed by a critic), a "pale flower," a "leprous corpse," "one with Nature," and finally into something "like a star" (lines 47, 48, 172, 370, 494). At the same time, he fears the presence of Keats and his texts within his poem may command and overpower his own originality. Shelley, as host and parasite, both feeds and chokes upon his rival's genius, while trans-



forming his fellow poet's identity and potent texts into "ghostly insubstantiality."

This doubleness helps explain the significance of one of the poem's governing motifs. In order to convey a relationship of simultaneous affinity and antagonism, growth and murder, Shelley repeatedly figures flowers emerging from soil that is nourished by a grave. This image becomes a kind of symbol for the elegy 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" as a memorial, at that 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 (lines 158, 17). Rather than expressing pure affirmation or pure negation, adornment or parasitical destruction, ecstasy or despair, idealism or skepticism, Shelley's elegy is a drama of impasse. The poet's plight is chillingly illustrated by one of *Adonais*'s darkest moments, in lines that could stand as a motto for the anguish of poetic rivalry: "what still is dear / Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither" (lines 474-75).

## II

A fascinating mixture of competition, admiration and envy colors the relationship between the two young poets and helps explain the dynamic of attraction and repulsion underlying *Adonais*. In his letters, Shelley alternately criticizes, admires, distorts and fears Keats's personality and poetry. His correspondence features contradictory and inconsistent rhetoric not unlike that of *Adonais* itself. On the surface, Shelley's comments about Keats frequently reveal his disdain for the "narrow principles of taste" that he feels mar much of Keats's work, his admiration for what he sees as a notable poetic talent that has not yet been brought to fruition, and a deliberate portrayal of Keats as fragile and too easily disheartened by the same kind of harsh reviews Shelley himself had endured ("Preface," p. 30). Several critics, such as James A. W. Heffernan and Susan Wolfson, have persuasively demonstrated that Shelley deliberately invented the story that Keats's death was a result of his oversensitive reaction to an excessively hostile review of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*. This fiction is integral to *Adonais*, and, thanks in part to Shelley, became a widely accepted

explanation of Keats's demise.<sup>16</sup> Critics have attributed Shelley's exaggerated portrayal of Keats as weak and effeminate to a self-serving strategy, meant to bolster his own strength in comparison to Keats's weakness by stressing his own ability to withstand criticism. By portraying Keats as weak and vulnerable in his correspondence and in his elegy, Heffernan argues, Shelley was able to prove his own poetic power and to display his own ability to endure criticism. I believe this is only a rather small part of the story. As useful as these studies are in suggesting *how* Shelley transforms or (to use Heffernan's term) *consumes* Keats, they do not illuminate fully enough *why* he would do so, nor do they adequately explain the complicated and strained relationship between the poets, Shelley's subtle readings and disfigurements of Keats's work in *Adonais*, nor the structure of equivocation that characterizes his elegy.

Shelley and Keats first met in December 1816, while Shelley was visiting Leigh Hunt, the mutual friend and link between the two poets. (It was Hunt who first joined the names Keats and Shelley in a piece on three "Young Poets," December 1, 1816.) Drawing on the records denoting when Keats and Hunt saw each other during that winter, and on Hunt's comment that "Keats did not take to Shelley as kindly as Shelley did to him," Donald H. Reiman points out that "Keats did not particularly enjoy Shelley's company and may have sought out Hunt when Shelley was not with him" ("Keats and Shelley," 405). Reiman notes "a spirit of rivalry" in Keats's early comments about Shelley, his fellow "Young Poet," and claims that "however much Keats hoped to surpass Shelley, he did not dismiss him lightly." Such competitive jockeying led to "an understanding between Keats and Shelley that each would write a long poem within six month's time," a mutually inspiring (and presumably competitive) situation that resulted in the creation of Keats's *Endymion* and Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* (405). Obviously the presence of a rival whose genius one admires can spur a poet's creativity as well as oppress it.

\* 16. On Shelley's invention and transmission of the story of Keats's death, see Cameron, pp. 426–27; Wolfson, *passim*; Heffernan, esp. 295–96; and P.M.S. Dawson, "Byron, Shelley, and the 'New School,'" in *Shelley Revalued*, "Shelley gave this myth currency in the Preface to *Adonais*, and it is undoubtedly from Shelley that Byron adopted it" (92). It was immortalized, unfortunately for Keats, by Byron's widely-read satirical lines in *Don Juan*, Canto xi ("John Keats, who was killed off by one critique . . .").

In his extremely useful and influential chronicle of the Keats-Shelley relationship, Reiman overlooks the more complex sources of this "spirit of rivalry" and downplays its effects on either poet's work or vision. For example, he does not recognize that Keats's aversion to Shelley may have stemmed less from personal dislike (or class anxiety) than from either his own fears about Shelley's creative strength or from his wariness of Shelley's nearly predatory interest in his own work. Such omissions could be the result of Reiman's problematic decision that

we need not struggle to ascertain how much Shelley influenced Keats or to what extent they shared a common poetic diction and were aware of the same heritage; the most important question is whether each had an independent poetic vision that displayed itself through a fundamentally personal style, and of this there can be no doubt. (407)

To dismiss the question of how much one great poet influenced the other by assuming rather facilely that each exhibits a "fundamentally personal style," a style that is free from turmoil and dialogue with the other's, is, to my mind, to underestimate a great deal: the complexity of the Keats-Shelley relationship, the dynamics of either poet's stylistic development, and the importance of Keats and his work to *Adonais*. In fact, little is *more* important in the Keats-Shelley relationship than to what extent each poet truly felt he had developed an "independent poetic vision that displayed itself through a fundamental personal style" and whether this very issue plagued, perplexed, or goaded either poet in his life or work. The evidence shows that it did.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the poets were intensely curious about each other *and* wary of falling under the other's influence, Keats being equally sensitive about the issue of poetic independence as Shelley. In May 1817, Keats

17. While Reiman dismisses the complexity of intertextual relations between the two poets, it is notable that he counters the pervasive critical trend to see *Adonais* as essentially a poem about Shelley that only uses Keats and his death as an impetus: "It is at least an oversimplification to imply that Shelley's *Adonais* concerns Shelley himself rather than Keats. That judgment has been based on the supposition that Shelley's interest in Keats as a man and a poet was slight or ephemeral, but the evidence in Shelley's letters does not warrant such a conclusion. Keats receives, indeed, more attention from Shelley than any other acquaintance left behind in England except those with whom he was in regular correspondence . . ." ("Keats and Shelley," 417).

asks Hunt “does Shelley go on telling strange Stories of the Death of kings? Tell him there are stran<ge> Stories of the death of Poets—some have died before they were conceived” (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 11). Besides being eerily prophetic of *Adonais*, the letter also reveals Keats’s interest in what Shelley is writing about, and even jauntily offers advice on subject matter. But, as is typical of Keats, the comment is also self-deprecating, hinting at his fear that he may “cease to be / Before my pen has gleam’d my teeming brain” and urging Shelley to be the narrator of his early demise.<sup>18</sup> Keats’s wariness of Shelley’s influence is clear in another letter, from October 1817, in which Keats urges Benjamin Bailey to see “how independant my writing has been,” and goes on to explain that “I refused to visit Shelley, that I might have my own unfettered scope.”<sup>19</sup> We can only surmise if Shelley knew that Keats intentionally avoided him in order to maintain his own creative independence. But the record suggests that he was indeed bothered by his rival’s deflection of his interest. In early 1818, while writing *Endymion*, Keats remarked that

the fact is [Hunt] & Shelley are hurt & perhaps justly, at my not having showed them the affair officiously & from several hints I have had they appear much disposed to dissect & anatomize, any trip or slip I may have made. (*Letter of John Keats*, p. 56)

Apparently Shelley was so avid about seeing *Endymion* that he became quite bitter when the desire to read, comment on, and critique his “friend’s” work was frustrated by Keats’s reluctance to have his “scope” fettered. Shelley does seem to have been interested in monitoring or constraining what his friend wrote in 1817: in his 1820 letter, Keats recalls Shelley “advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead heath” and then offers him the same advice (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 390).

The “spirit of rivalry” that characterized this relationship clearly stimulated the poets’ writing and stirred their apprehensions about

18. Since this letter was sent to Hunt while he was with staying with Shelley at Marlow (see note, *Letters of John Keats*, p. 11), it is likely that Hunt showed Keats’s comment to Shelley. The lines quoted are from Keats’s sonnet, “When I have fears . . .,” in *John Keats, Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1982), p. 166.

19. *Letters of John Keats*, p. 27. This remark is often taken as a sign that Keats alone, and not Shelley, was anxious about poetic independence; see for example Cameron, p. 424; White, p. 231.

each other's genius; it even resulted in a famous spontaneous writing competition. On 14 February 1818, Keats wrote to his brothers that "the Wednesday before last Shelley, Hunt & I wrote each a Sonnet on the River Nile, some day you shall read them all" (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 63). According to the rules, the sonnets were to be written in fifteen minutes (but while Keats and Shelley finished in time, Hunt stayed up half the night working on his).<sup>20</sup> It is hard to imagine that such face-to-face contests between these lauded "Young Poets" could have been free from jealousy and tension.

Just at this point of competitive give-and-take, Shelley and Keats met for the last time in February 1818, after which Shelley left England, never to return. Reiman claims that Keats had little interest in Shelley or his work once he departed and that "we may assume that Keats went about the business of searching for his identity as a man and as a poet free of any attraction or antagonism toward" Shelley ("Keats and Shelley," 411). Whether Keats was so happily unconcerned with Shelley's influence is debatable, but even Reiman agrees that Shelley "for his part, maintained a somewhat patronizing interest in Keats's poetic development" (411). I would add that, for Shelley at least, the business of "searching for his identity" as a poet was never "free of . . . attraction and antagonism toward" Keats. The very process of developing that identity is intertwined with his preoccupation with Keats, and attraction and antagonism are precisely the conflicting motives that underlie *Adonais*. In August 1818, Shelley asked his publisher about Keats's *Endymion*, expressing his great desire to see what fruit their mutual contest had produced for his friend; when he finally did read the poem in 1819, Shelley was (at least publicly) disappointed by its quality, but not without registering a telling sense of relief. If only Keats had printed mere fragments of the overly long work, Shelley writes Charles Ollier, "I should have been led to *admire Keats as a poet more than I ought*, of which there is now no danger" (*Letters*, II, 411; my emphasis). While there is a touch of condescension here, which may be due (as P.M.S. Dawson argues) to Shelley's disdain for Keats's proximity to Hunt and his "new school," and thus his being "entangled in the cold vanity of systems," the let-

20. See notes to *John Keats, Complete Poems*, pp. 438–39. All three poems were later published, but only Hunt's appeared during his lifetime.

ter more notably reveals Shelley's wariness of the *danger* inherent in admiring a fellow poet's work too much, of losing his own distinctive qualities under the influence of Keats's.<sup>21</sup>

The famous letters the two poets exchanged directly are marked by veiled compliments, pointed advice and mixed messages.<sup>22</sup> After learning of Keats's illness, Shelley wrote to Keats in July 1820, and graciously invited him to Italy to recuperate. He compliments Keats's *Endymion* but adds backhandedly that it has "treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion" which "people in general will not endure & that is the cause of the comparatively few copies which have been sold" (*Letters*, II, 221). Shelley implies that Keats should practice more restraint and discipline in his art. Shelley again criticizes his friend's tendency towards "system," by which he seems to mean Keats's inability to remain as independent from fashionable conventions (established by Wordsworth and Southey, and imitated by Hunt) as he: he adds "in poetry *I* have sought to avoid system & mannerism; I wish those who excel me in genius, would pursue the same plan" (*Letters*, II, 221). In addition to being a jab at Keats's role as Hunt's protégé, the remark also amounts to a statement of Shelley's own poetic independence: Shelley immodestly stresses his freedom from any system or school at the same time he overpraises Keats's genius as greater than his own. Perhaps the strength of this claim masks his insecurity about clearly distinguishing himself from Keats, and from other writers, systems, and mannerisms.<sup>23</sup> He also reverses the flow of

21. P.M.S. Dawson, in "Byron, Shelley, and the 'New School,'" contends that Shelley and Byron disliked Keats's work more because of his association with Leigh Hunt, and his role in Hunt's self-proclaimed (Wordsworthian) "new school" than because of any close reading and understanding of their fellow poet's work. This unwarranted prejudice against Keats led Shelley to claim repeatedly that he was repulsed by Keats's "narrow principles of taste" (Preface, 390) and to disregard much of Keats's poetry without real reason. Dawson concludes that "this easy misrepresentation of Keats made it possible to deflect the challenge that his poetry posed; in the context of the 'new school' he could become conveniently invisible" (103, 106). While I agree Shelley misrepresents Keats and attempts to render him invisible in some ways, the other side of that disdain, a side which Dawson glosses over, is Shelley's *fear* of the threat posed by Keats: the anxieties that led Shelley to "deflect the challenge" of Keats's poetry in the first place. Also, Dawson seems to underestimate how closely Shelley actually read Keats's poetry, as evidenced by his responses to it in *Adonais* (on this response, see Curran, pp. 170–180).

22. On this exchange, see Reiman, "Keats and Shelley," 413; Cameron, p. 425; Fred W. Milne, "Shelley on Keats: A Notebook Dialogue," *English Language Notes*, 13.4 (June 1976), 278–84.

23. As part of his effort to differentiate himself from his threatening fellow poet, Shelley repeatedly tells his correspondents how unlike each other they are, perhaps protesting too much in the process: for example, he tells William Gifford, while defending Keats from negative reviews, that he writes as an impartial judge since "the canons of taste to which Keats has conformed his other compositions [other

influence, and suggests that Keats should follow his lead; he implies that Keats should be more Shelleyan, while avoiding the converse, thus rhetorically eliminating the possibility that Shelley would pursue whatever "plan" the greater "genius" Keats is practicing.<sup>24</sup>

Keats, responding to this letter with irritation and what Fred W. Milne calls "an interesting tit for tat," tells Shelley himself to "be more of an artist," a comment I would suggest may have led to the particularly ore-laden rifts of *Adonais*.<sup>25</sup> He continues with a half-compliment, half-riposte about Shelley's lack of artistry and mercurial nature: "The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furl'd for six Months together." Keats then adds, self-deprecatingly, "and is not this extraordina[r]y talk for the writer of *Endymion*? whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards—" (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 390). In such exchanges, the two writers clearly express great interest in one another's work, as well as a mingling of modesty with fierce pride, as they criticize, advise, goad, and generally attempt to deflect or meet the challenge the other poses.

In the months before and after he learned (in mid-April 1821) that Keats had died, Shelley's letters reveal his inner struggles as he attempted to work through his ambivalence towards Keats. In various letters, we find Shelley suffering from deep despair, dwelling on his inability to write, criticizing or praising Keats, or pondering the dynamics of literary influence. For example, Shelley's letter to Byron on 4 May 1821, contains traces of the complicated network of ideas and insecurities that would contribute to *Adonais* (*Letters*, II, 289–91).<sup>26</sup> In the course of one paragraph, Shelley moves quickly

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than *Hyperion*] are the very reverse of my own" (*Letters*, II, 253). See also his letter to Joseph Severn, in which he says of himself that "however he may differ from Keats in more important qualities, at least resembles him in that accidental one, a want of popularity" (*Letters*, II, 366).

24. On the barely submerged hostility in this letter, see Fred W. Milne, "Shelley on Keats," who remarks that "the thinly veiled charge that Keats, unlike Shelley, was guilty of 'system & mannerism' in poetry so neatly balance[s] any words of praise that the latter are effectively canceled out" and thus, the letter "obviously irritated Keats, whose relationship with Shelley had always been guardedly uneasy" (280–81).

25. Milne, 281; *Letters of John Keats*, p. 390.

26. It is unclear when Shelley actually began composing *Adonais*, because of several contradictory letters. See Kenneth Neill Cameron, p. 643 n.20, for a thorough discussion. Cameron concludes, and in this he is followed by Knerr, that Shelley began the elegy in April and concluded forty-three stanzas by 8 June, completing the poem by 7 July (Knerr argues that the elegy was finished by 16 June, except for minor changes [pp. 11–12]).

from one preoccupation and insecurity to another. In telling Byron about Keats's death, Shelley first critiques Keats for having written "some good verses in bad taste," and then swiftly transforms Keats into a weak flower nipped in the bud: "some plants, which require delicacy in rearing, might bring forth beautiful flowers if ever they should arrive at maturity." Clearly, Shelley has already begun to translate Keats into the realm of metaphor, in general, and into a delicate flower, in particular, a process soon to reach fruition in *Adonais*. He discusses his belief that Keats's death was caused by the harsh review which led to a "rapid consumption," then goes on to admire and envy the "eagle"-like strength his far more famous friend Byron exhibits in being so impervious to criticism that he could even attack his attackers (a reference to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*). Shelley, in the midst of the creative crisis that underlies *Adonais*, then laments his own inability to "write anything worth calling a poem" while exaggerating his "morbid" indifference to "praise or blame" (*Letters*, II, 289). In an interesting shift, he counters Byron's earlier attack on Keats for disliking the school of Pope, only to launch into a somewhat strained declaration of his poetic independence:

I certainly do not think Pope, or *any* writer, a fit model for any succeeding writer; if he, or they should be determined to be so, it would all come to a question as to under *what forms* mediocrity should perpetually reproduce itself; for true genius vindicates itself an exemption from all regard to whatever has gone before—and in this question I feel no interest. (*Letters*, II, 290)

It is clear from this passage that in this period following Keats's death and just as he begins to compose the elegy, Shelley is concerned (in spite of his denial of any interest) with questions of poetic influence, poets' susceptibility to critique, "true genius," artistic mediocrity and imitation. When Shelley ponders whether any poet should be "a fit model" for a "succeeding writer," there is a doubleness at work in his rhetoric, arising specifically in the notion of "succeeding." Perhaps unintentionally, Shelley's terms slip and overlap; it is not clear whether he means that a *successful* writer or a *subsequent* writer should avoid taking earlier artists as models. This is because Shelley knows that since every poet inevitably follows other writers, he or she there-



fore lives and works in a condition of Bloomian "belatedness." Instead of "cowering under the Wings of great Poets," a fate Keats feared as much as Shelley, poets must overcome their precursors in order to create new, original art.<sup>27</sup> But the question of how or whether one can achieve such artistic success by eschewing "all regard for what has come before" is precisely the onus Shelley struggles with in *Adonais*. Since Shelley knows that to "succeed" other great writers is automatically to have grave problems "succeeding," doubt lingers beneath his confident assertion about "true genius" in this passage. Since Shelley's thoughts seem focused on *both* success and belatedness, the dual meanings invade his discourse at once.

Indeed, Shelley was deeply aware of how poets inevitably build new works out of the bits and pieces of other texts, on top of the ruins of other art. In *A Defence of Poetry* (written only three months before *Adonais*) Shelley refers to "that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of time" (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 493). The idea of an eternal poem and sphere of poets sketched out in the *Defence* will become the crux of *Adonais*. In the process of adding to this great temple of poetry, Shelley argues, individual poets become "trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves" (p. 508). Poetic influence as a force is impersonal, eternal, and unable to be changed; poets, on the other hand, are inspired, moved, and changed by that influence. This figurative situation directly mirrors the end of *Adonais*, where Keats, now an unchanging, impersonal poetic influence (or "breath"), descends upon and moves Shelley, the poet, almost against his will (as he is "borne darkly, fearfully, afar" [line 492]).

Shelley apparently could see this dynamic at work in his own verse, but seems to be less aware of (or less willing to divulge) the presence of the more direct, important influences with which he was wrestling, such as the work of Wordsworth and of Keats. In a letter written just after completing *Adonais*, Shelley asked his friends John

27. See Keats's anxious remark, when musing on his creative endeavors, that "I have great reason to be content . . . I have I am sure many friends, who, if I fail, will attribute any change in my Life and Temper to Humbleness rather than to Pride—to a cowering under the Wings of great Poets rather than to a bitterness that I am not appreciated" (27 February 1818; *Letters of John Keats*, p. 70).

and Maria Gisborne if they could detect the presence of Goethe's *Faust* in his elegy for Keats:

Do you observe any traces of him in the Poem I send you. Poets, the best of them—are a very cameleonic race: they take the colour not only of *what they feed on*, but of the very leaves under which they pass. (*Letters*, II, 308; my emphasis)

Interestingly enough, the figure Shelley uses here as a metaphor for the process of poetic influence recalls the parasite/host binary (analyzed by J. Hillis Miller) while presaging the imagery of *Adonais*. Shelley depicts the writer's interaction with other texts in terms of the eater and the eaten. The chameleon metaphor suggests that some deceit and camouflage is involved in one writer's consumption of another; there is a sense that the poet fears his ingestion of previous texts will be detectable by his readers.<sup>28</sup> Shelley's awareness that even the "very leaves"—a trope that implies the pages of books the writer peruses—can tint a poet's verbal palette at the same time they give him food as sustenance will give rise to one of the crucial tensions at the heart of his elegy. Here, however, Shelley seems to displace the real source of discomfort; he transforms his preoccupation with the influence of Keats and the Lake Poets into an admission (or confession) of the more negligible presence of Goethe.

It is telling that Shelley uses similar alimentary imagery in several other letters, as well as in *Adonais*. In his 27 July letter inviting Keats to Pisa, he oddly remarks, with traces of both envy and relief: "This consumption is a disease particularly fond of people who write such good verses as you have done" (*Letters*, II, 220). While Shelley ostensibly refers to other young talents struck down by the same illness, his strange comment may have more sinister implications. Implicit in Shelley's casual linkage of writing and "consumption" are multiple and contradictory meanings of that key word—both the disease that devours and wastes its helpless victim, and the process of eating and

28. Shelley's reference to poets as chameleon-like (a metaphor also found in his poem, "An Exhortation") bears uncanny resemblance to Keats's famous remark, in a letter, about the "camelion poet" who "has no character—it enjoys light and shade" and "has no identity" (*Letters of John Keats*, p. 157). The similarity reveals a remarkable affinity between the two poets' imaginations and conceptions of the poet's role; however, Shelley's comment is notably concerned with poetic influence and intertextual traces and Keats's with poetic identity.

reading, destroying and absorbing, that “good” poets are apparently especially subjected to. The trope reveals Shelley’s distressing awareness that good poets, like Keats or himself, are inevitably consumed and transformed: by their present and future readers, by “dull Time [which] / Feeds like slow fire upon a hoary brand” (*Adonais*, lines 442–43), and most importantly, by other poets—especially elegists—who help sustain the works of other writers at the same time that they devour and thrive on them.<sup>29</sup>

In another letter, to Marianne Hunt, Shelley again draws on such imagery of feeding and eating:

Where is Keats now? I am anxiously expecting him in Italy where I shall take care to bestow every possible attention on him. I consider his a most valuable life, & I am deeply interested in his safety. I intend to be the physician of both his body & his soul, to keep the one warm & to teach the other Greek & Spanish. I am aware indeed in part that I am *nourishing a rival who will far surpass {me}* and this is an additional motive & will be an added pleasure. (October 29, 1820, p. 239, my emphasis)

Here Shelley casts himself in the role of the preserver of Keats; he imagines Keats as a frail, helpless friend needing instruction, classical education, and sustenance. Aside from the rather blatant indication of Shelley’s somewhat class-based condescension for his “Cockney school” friend, this letter is remarkable for its tone and imagery. While his concern for the terminally-ill Keats is presumably genuine, the effusive emphasis on keeping Keats’s “valuable life” under his regard, watching over his body, and administering to his soul seems overly manipulative and even predatory.<sup>30</sup> Shelley seems anxious to have his powerful rival where he can see him (recall Shelley’s anger when Keats refused to show him *Endymion*), and like an overly-wel-

29. My attention to the multiple meanings of “consumption” “is indebted to Heffernan. Heffernan does not discuss this particular remark about “consumption,” however; nor does he investigate the full ramifications of this rhetorical figure as a central locus of the tensions and paradoxes of *Adonais*.

30. Shelley’s unsubtle comment that Keats is a “rival who will far surpass [me]” seems to contradict his usual estimation in his letters that while Keats has talent, it is lamentably clothed in the poor taste of Hunt and Wordsworth. This is because Shelley’s mixed feelings towards his rival are manifested in very different ways depending on whom he is addressing: here, Shelley writes to Hunt’s wife, who, as Shelley even mentions, will show the letter to Hunt, Keats’s protector and mentor. Compare the different inflection Shelley’s remarks about Keats take on when he is addressing them to Lord Byron, for example (*Letters*, II, 289, 308).

coming host, invites his guest into his home to be “nourished.” Though Keats replied gratefully that he would attempt to visit Shelley in Pisa, if his death did not make it impossible, he never arrived, despite the fact that Shelley was “anxiously expecting him.”<sup>31</sup> While this final frustration may have seemed to Shelley like yet another snub of his interest in Keats and his poetry, Shelley would soon be keeping the young poet’s “body & soul” forever warm, nourished, and preserved, whether he liked or not, within the abode of *Adonais*.

## III

From the beginning of *Adonais*, with its epigraphs from Plato and Moschus, Shelley announces that his poem for and about Keats is built upon the framework of other texts and is an extension of the history of other poems that mourn for lost poets. The web of allusions and echoes he uses reveals that Shelley is self-consciously aware of the chain of poets before him who have memorialized, transformed and fed upon their lost rivals: Moschus’s “Elegy” consumed fellow poet Bion, Spenser’s *Astrophel* consumed Sir Philip Sidney, Milton’s *Lycidas* consumed Edward King.<sup>32</sup> The second epigraph, taken from Moschus’s “Elegy for Bion,” introduces the idea that the friend was murdered by a jealous critic when he ingested poison. While Shelley clearly appropriates this passage in order to set up his attack, both in the Preface and in the poem itself, on the critics he believes slanderously assassinated Keats, it also inaugurates the chain of alimentary

31. See Reiman, “Keats and Shelley,” 413–15, on Shelley’s somewhat contradictory invitation (though he invites Keats to “take up residence with us,” he soon writes Claire that he had told Keats to come to Pisa “without inviting him into our house”), Keats’s conditional acceptance, and the reasons why Keats never made it to Pisa. Reiman suggests, among other things, that Keats may have stayed in Rome because “he wished to have nothing to do with Hunt or Shelley,” which suggests that Keats was again intentionally rejecting Shelley’s overtures (414–15). This viewpoint is corroborated by Newman Ivey White’s biography of Shelley, in which he notes that Keats told “Charles Cowden Clarke that his sole motive in not accepting Shelley’s invitation was a fear that in his company he could not remain a free agent” (*Shelley*, II, 212).

32. See William Ulmer’s recent article, “*Adonais* and the Death of Poetry,” for a very useful discussion of this elegy as an intensely self-conscious text, a “historicist elegy” full of “Orphic glances backward” whose task is “the reviving of a dead tradition” and which engages in a “dialogue of past and present” (427–51). Also see Curran, who argues that the “genre” of pastoral elegy defines “the imperatives and limits of *Adonais*” and examines Shelley’s interaction with the tradition that stretches from Bion to *Lycidas* (pp. 166–70). For other commentary about the relationship between Shelley and the tradition of pastoral elegy, along somewhat similar lines, also see Behrendt, p. 246; Wasserman, pp. 461–64; Bloom, *Visionary Company*, pp. 342–49; Hogle, pp. 295–307; and Tetreault, pp. 221–34.

imagery involving eating and death, consumption and murder. Furthermore, Moschus's lines hint at the perpetrator but do not expose his identity: "What mortal was so cruel as to mix the drug for thee, or to give it to thee, who heard thy voice? He escapes [shall be nameless in] my song" (p. 390, n2). This figure who escapes being named within the song is, on the surface, the villainous critic; however, Shelley's use of this line may also suggest his own barely hidden complicity in "killing" Keats, as parasite and Cain-like fratricide. Shelley too will remain "nameless" throughout the song. It is also notable that Shelley chose to omit the next line, which would surely have been fitting as a threat to the reviewer, while frightening with regard to his own role: "Yet justice overtakes all." This epigraph serves as a first clue in the poem of Shelley's conflicted feelings towards Keats. It is an impression not undone by the equivocal terms of the Preface that follows, where Shelley criticizes the "narrow principles of taste on which several of his earlier compositions were modelled" and condescendingly describes Keats as "sensitive spirit" who was "hooted from the stage of life" (390–92).<sup>33</sup>

The drama of *Adonais* then begins with several highly stylized, overwrought tropes of mourning which Shelley appropriates from the tradition of the pastoral elegy.<sup>34</sup> Many readers have noted that the poem opens with a sense of artificiality and distance: "I weep for Adonais—he is dead!" As Angela Leighton has argued, "to 'weep' here is rhetorically decorous; an unmistakable elegiac formula . . . the verb is already distanced from its literal meaning, and expresses a ceremonial enactment of grief, not a spontaneous passion" (p. 157).<sup>35</sup>

33. On Shelley's deliberate effeminization of Keats and aggrandizement of himself in the Preface to *Adonais*, see Heffernan, 297–301, Wolfson, 25–26.

34. My reading of *Adonais* as dramatic utterance resembles Ronald Tetreault's point that the Shelley's poem is self-consciously rhetorical in "dramatizing the emotions of his elegist" (p. 234) and Ronald Becht's claim that the poem is "a self-contained mental drama" that "is 'about' the speaker and his state of mind," though my approach differs sharply from Becht, who sees the poem as a drama that moves from "sorrow" to visionary "consolation" (194).

35. Several critics examine Shelley's manipulation of traditional gestures of mourning in the first two-thirds of the poem, comment on its artificiality, and discuss how these elements contrast with the last third of the poem. For example, Jean Hall discusses the ineffectiveness of mourning in the first two-thirds of the poem ("*Adonais*," in *Modern Critical Views: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985], esp. 146–48). Leighton analyzes the highly overwrought and artificial rhetoric of the poem, which she feels is a completely self-conscious method of exploring the insufficiency of both elegy and figural language.

Thus, from the first, the rhetoric of *Adonais* is self-divided, undermining its own assertions with contradictory gestures. The fact that the figure lamented is "Adonais" and not "John Keats" adds to the sense of strained ceremony, artificiality, and conventional gesturing. From the poem's title and first line onward, Keats has been "consumed" by Shelley, as Heffernan suggests, but to an even greater extent than the critic seems to realize. He has been ingested, transformed, stylized, and made invisible by Shelley. This elegiac tradition, Shelley suggests, has always been preoccupied with transforming its subjects into "an echo" (not the thing itself, but a reflection once removed) "and a light unto eternity" (line 9). Thus, Shelley begins the poem by introducing the idea of posterity and poetic history: Adonais, like all poets, like Shelley himself, is an "echo" of past writers, and will remain "till the Future dares / Forget the past" (lines 7–8). However, in this formulation, posterity (and through it, poetic immortality that grants one entrance to the "abode where the Eternal are") is not guaranteed; rather, it relies on the vagaries of an unknowable future, and is thus immediately tainted with doubt (line 495).<sup>36</sup>

Shelley then depicts Urania, his figure for Adonais's mother and poetic muse, sitting in "her Paradise, / 'Mid listening Echoes . . . while one, with soft enamoured breath, / Rekindled all the fading melodies" (lines 14–16). The one echo whose breath resumes the fading songs, as Ross G. Woodman points out, is Shelley himself.<sup>37</sup> These songs, Woodman notes, will be transformed "according to [the echo's] own understanding": the breath will *re-kindle* Keats's melodies, but will not *repeat* them (p. 67). Adonais's eternal absence thus grants power to the echo (Shelley) who now controls those melodies. Setting in motion the governing motif, Shelley immediately figures Keats's "fading melodies" as "flowers that mock the corse beneath" (line 17). Not only do these texts grow, however fragilely and temporarily, from the soil where the dead poet lies; they also try in vain, like this elegy, to adorn and hide "the coming bulk of death" (line 18). At the same time that these songs are nourished by the dead, they

36. On Shelley's general preoccupation with his own posterity and future (textual) life, so central to *Adonais*, see Andrew Bennett's "Shelley in Posterity," in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 215–33.

37. Ross G. Woodman, "Shelley's Urania," *Studies in Romanticism*, 17 (Winter 1978), 61–75 (67).

also *mock* them, as their own vitality and strength contrasts with the stasis of the deceased. Since both Shelley and “death *feed* upon” *Adonais*’s “mute voice,” the image also suggests a symbol for the pastoral elegy itself—a work that pays tribute to, adorns, and grows from the death of a poet, that owes its very existence to that dying (line 27; my emphasis). Shelley suggests that an elegy like *Adonais* even mocks its subject by being more alive than he and by having the power to rekindle and re-imagine the now-inert and “mute” subject however it desires.

Shelley’s evocation of the dead *Adonais*, especially in the first third of the poem, certainly transforms Keats into “scarcely more than a victim” (Heffernan, 304). In the early stanzas of the poem, Shelley casts *Adonais* in the terms used in his letters and the Preface (“delicate,” “fragile,” “susceptible”):

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 . . .  
 . . . . .  
 is waste . . .

(lines 46–53)

Shelley obviously emphasizes the youthfulness, the weak and dainty qualities of this invented version of Keats. This strategy, in effect, effeminizes and “unmans” Keats, robbing him of virility, and through it, poetic strength. The stanza portrays Keats himself, once again, as one “who grew, like a pale flower,” this time a flower “fed with true love tears.” As both Reiman and Curran note, this image is an allusion to Keats’s own “*Isabella*,” where the heroine grieves for her lost lover by severing his head and planting it in a flower pot, watering it with tears, until a basil plant is born.<sup>38</sup> While critics have aptly placed the allusion, we must consider *why* Shelley would use this image in particular. First, the metaphor suggests that *Keats*, like Shelley, grew

38. See Reiman, “Keats and Shelley,” 426; and Curran, 170–71.

atop the remains of literary predecessors. But the allusion is even more complicated and ingenious. Not only does it further introduce into the texture of the poem Shelley's key trope for his elegy—flowers growing from a dead body—but it does so in the very act of echoing a text by the dead Keats. In this way, the poem again reflects on its own rhetorical processes: by appropriating one of its leitmotifs from Keats, *Adonais* itself mirrors the basil plant growing from the soil nourished by the murdered subject's head.

At the same time, a hint of Shelley's agonized awareness of his own belatedness underlies this passage, in the reference to Keats as the "last" hope of the muse Urania; if his lost "brother" was the "extreme hope" and the *last* poet, where does that leave Shelley and his poetic future? The lines reveal Shelley's sense of crisis, his fear that his own poetic power might not be equal to the task demanded (a fear hinted at in his comment in a letter to Claire written during the composition of *Adonais* that "I feel incapable of composition") (*Letters*, II, 288). There is both a sense of relief that the "last" is now silent and no longer a threat (such as in the reference to *Adonais*'s "mute voice") and a fear that Shelley himself is a late-comer to the very poetic tradition Keats has so brilliantly capped (line 27).

In stanzas 9 to 17, Shelley depicts a conventional procession of mourners who pay tribute to *Adonais*, but instead of describing actual figures or Cupids (as in Bion's "Lament for Adonis"), Shelley imagines the "Dreams" of Keats swarming around him. These strangely abstract Dreams, Splendours, and "Incarnations / of hopes and fears" (line 111) have been widely regarded as a reference to Keats's poems (Knerr, p. 72). Following the conventions of pastoral elegy, those who mourn *Adonais*, in this case his "Ministers of thought," are described as sheep that his mind once fed: they "were his flocks, whom near the living streams / Of his young spirit he fed" (lines 73–75). But the image is more than just generic: first, Shelley refers to the creation of poetry in images that evoke eating, being nourished, devouring. Second, the Keats-as-shepherd figure also further links *Adonais* with Abel, the successful keeper of sheep who was murdered by his jealous brother Cain. Keats's "passion-winged . . . Dreams" are akin to Abel's "choicest firstlings of the flock" that, when offered to God, enrage the less successful Cain with murderous



envy (Genesis 4:1–16). This echo is another early suggestion of Shelley's jealous regard for the "glimmering Incarnations" of his "brother's" mind. Underscoring this comparison is the fact that Shelley in the poem further resembles Cain, who was a tiller of the soil, because of the recurring notion of the elegist as a planter of flowers over a grave.

Because Shelley views Keats's poetry as a waste of talent, as the work of a genius to admire, and as a threat to his own individuality, he applies his typical imagery—of things dissolving, disintegrating, abstractions that flutter away as they are asserted—to his evocation of Keats's own poems and thoughts.<sup>39</sup> This strategy defuses the potency and specificity of his rival's greatest poems. To transform Keats's sensuous and often empirically-based poems into a series of floating Dreams and Splendours that are "a moving pomp . . . Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream," is to portray them as something artificial ("pomp" and "pageantry"), airy and insubstantial (line 117). But this dialogue about and between poetic texts is even more subtly handled: as he does throughout *Adonais*, Shelley here specifically echoes one of Keats's "fading melodies" only to overturn and "rekindle" it, to twist it against its author. As Donald Reiman notes, the "pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream" recalls the opening of Keats's masterful "To Autumn"—"Seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness."<sup>40</sup> But it is significant that Shelley applies the phrasing in a context that empties Keats's poetry of its substance and power. He echoes Keats's diction and renowned attention to ephemerality, only to apply such features to his rival's own creations, hinting at their transience in the process. Shelley's strategy in such passages suggests that his understanding of intertextual relations anticipates Miller's claim that "the previous text is both the ground of the new one and something the new one must annihilate by incorporating it, turning it into ghostly insubstantiality" (p. 225).

Although the mental creations of Keats are transformed and reduced to airy mist, they still form the food that the "Lost Echo," another figure for Shelley himself, consumes in stanza 15: she "feeds

39. See Keach's chapter on this particular aspect of Shelley's imagery: "Evanescence: Melting, Dissolving, Erasing" (pp. 118–53).

40. Reiman, "Keats and Shelley," 426.

her grief with his remembered lay" (line 128; my emphasis). By casting himself as the mythical Echo, and as an "echo" of Narcissus/Keats, Shelley further explores the paradoxical relationship between elegist and subject. Is he merely repeating Keats? Is he creating something new and vital? By using the figure of Echo, Shelley cunningly evokes the myth of Narcissus as a perfectly fitting emblem for the problematic relationship between himself and Keats. In the myth, Echo repeats Narcissus's call for help (as Shelley does with the ill Keats), and the two engage in a spirited dialogue. But when Narcissus scorns Echo's attentions—a rejection that mirrors Keats's snubbing of Shelley's overtures—he falls in love with his own reflection, dies, and is transformed into a flower (just as the figure of Keats is throughout the elegy). Echo herself becomes an echo of Narcissus's dying words, and then an echo of all sounds, a quality she shares with the highly allusive poet Shelley and his echoing of both Keats and poetic tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Echo's consumption and rekindling of the fading melodies of the lost rival does not offer lasting consolation to Shelley, who still must struggle to find his own voice while feeding upon that "remembered lay." Echo, he tells us, will no longer reply to the winds, fountains, and birds because "she can mimic not his lips" (line 132). Here Shelley rejects the possibility of pure imitation, because to mimic Keats would be the death of Shelley's own voice. Instead—as we saw with the allusion to "To Autumn"—he echoes and transforms not only the figure of his rival, but also Keats's ideas, images, and dying words. For example, when Shelley soon describes the effects of grief on some of the mourners, he notes how the "dew all turned to tears; odour, to sighing ruth" (line 144). While the reference to the *smells* of the seasons being changed into *pity* is an inscrutable and perhaps unnecessary image, it may actually be a sign of Shelley's verbal disfiguration of Keats. In his "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats compares the immortal melody of the bird to "the self-same song that found a path / Through the sad heart of *Ruth*" who stands in the fields "sick for home" (p. 281). Shelley, playing the role of Echo, picks up on the reverberations of Keats's words; he appropriates the reference to sad

41. On Shelley's complex use of Echo and Narcissus in *Alastor*, see Susan Fischman, "'Like the Sound of His own Voice': Gender, Audition, and Echo in *Alastor*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 43 (1994), 141–69.

Ruth in that key passage of Keats's Ode and turns it into a figure of "Odour, [turned] to *sighing ruth*." Both the repetition of "dew all turned to tears," a direct echo of the earlier allusion to Keats's "Isabella" (line 49), and the reference to Keats's nightingale in the very next line of *Adonais* (line 145), makes this perhaps unlikely example of the nuances of poetic influence at least plausible.<sup>42</sup>

In his "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats reveals his intensely conflicted feelings about the prospect of joining the "immortal bird": he is painfully aware that to "fade far away, dissolve and quite forget . . . the fever and the fret" of the world is also to "become a sod" (p. 280, lines 21–23, 60). While death may be a release from pain and temporality, Keats knows that such an escape means to become nothing, to be forever silent. In a crucial gesture, Shelley appropriates Keats's profound ambivalence towards death and transcendence and builds it into the oppositional (attracts-and-repels) structure that underlies *Adonais* and its attitudes towards death.<sup>43</sup> Shelley envies Keats's escape from the suffering of the real world of mortality, while he is terrified by the stasis and paralysis that death brings. At certain moments in the elegy the poet seems jealous of the quiet and numbness of *Adonais*'s present state, the peaceful stasis Keats so eloquently longed for yet always resisted ("surely he takes his fill / Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill," lines 62–63). In other passages Shelley seems relieved that he has not yet joined Keats in death. In stanzas 18 and 19, for example, Shelley describes the springtime renewal of life as a contrast to the stasis of Keats's present lot:

The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;  
The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear;

42. Stuart Curran argues persuasively against the common notion that Shelley disregarded all of Keats's late poems but *Hyperion*, and stresses that Shelley had read and developed a "penetrating understanding" of Keats's whole 1820 volume (including the Odes), despite the fact that he only mentioned praise for the fragment of *Hyperion* and strongly dismissed the rest of the poems (170; see also Heffernan, 306–307). Critics have located numerous allusions to the Odes throughout *Adonais* (see esp. Donald Reiman's catalogue of allusions, "Keats and Shelley," 426, and Curran, esp. 170–71).

43. See Stuart Curran's compelling, though problematic, argument about Shelley's response and extension of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," 173–75. "Shelley's design for *Adonais* is to answer the loaded questions left unresolved at the end of 'Ode to a Nightingale,' to restructure the logic that Keats allowed to turn in on itself and force it to the inevitable conclusion that Keats would not countenance." While I believe Shelley intentionally takes up Keats's probing of life and death in *Adonais*, I am not as convinced as Curran that Shelley *answers* Keats or resolves the tensions of Keats's Ode.

Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Season's bier;

.....

. . . And the green lizard, and the golden snake,

Like unimprisoned flames out of their trance awake.

(lines 156–62)

This awakening and rebirth is appropriately accompanied by another echo and reversal of Keats's late work: while Keats's poem about the approach of winter and death, "To Autumn," ends significantly and ominously when "gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (implying perhaps that the birds are communing just before their departure), Shelley's contrasting tribute to spring notes that Keats's "swallows reappear." Just as spring eventually ends and renews the movement begun with autumn, new texts are reborn from remnants of the old, a fact underscored again by the image of "fresh leaves and flowers" growing upon the funeral pyre of winter. Indeed, two stanzas later Shelley describes how "the leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender/ Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath," again recalling the basil-atop-cadaver image of "Isabella" (lines 172–73).

It is extremely important that Shelley's description of spring emphasizes that to be alive is to be full of "*change and motion*," to be an "*unimprisoned flame*" (lines 165, 162). With the reference to "flame," Shelley surely intends this description of living energy to contrast sharply with his depiction of Cestius's tomb (another grave-topping memorial that serves as one of Shelley's symbols for elegy itself). In stanza 50, Shelley describes that "refuge for" the ruler's "memory" as resembling "flame transformed to marble" (line 447). The reference to the tomb that decks Cestius's grave suggests Shelley's recognition that the goal, and inevitable result, of elegy (a kind of verbal refuge for the memory of the dead) is to catch an individual's fire in the stone of art. With these patterns of imagery, he emphasizes that Keats has been frozen and killed by the memorial he himself has written, and is now merely an *imprisoned* flame, thus setting himself up to be a kind of guilty, jealous killer. Just as the flowers now dance in the sun above the corpse, Shelley himself (and the poem he writes) remains full of living "change and motion" like an "unimprisoned flame" while Keats's fire has been held fast in marble.

No part of the poem is more filled with contradictions than Shelley's famous portrait of himself as one of the mourners, in stanzas 31 to 34, where the "elegist persona" is revealed to be what William Ulmer aptly calls "an oxymoron on the wing" (p. 443). Here, Shelley portrays the elegist as both like and unlike his lost contemporary, and as with the rest of the poem's key imagery, the portrait is deeply equivocal.<sup>44</sup> Shelley describes himself as a "frail Form, / A phantom among men" in order to emphasize his identification with the neglected Keats. However, the speaker stresses that while he has been similarly abandoned, he is able to endure, unlike the fallen *Adonais*. Aside from a demonstration of Shelley's comparative strength, the passage contains striking images that reinforce the sense that Shelley's identity, his language, and his position as elegist are full of irreconcilable contradictions, and in fact, are coming apart at the seams. Whereas *Adonais*'s thoughts and texts (as *Dreams* and *Splendours*) came to mourn for him, Shelley's "own thoughts . . . pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey" (lines 277–79). The image suggests that Shelley is a fugitive from his own thoughts and poems, that he has become, as Jean Hall notes, "his own destroyer" (p. 150). Such passages indicate Shelley's recognition of his elegy's tensions and deconstructive energies. His "spirit" is described in a series of paradoxes that evoke fading and disintegration:

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.

(lines 284–86)

The images of dispersal and fragmentation underscore Shelley's sense of the transience of mortal existence and his own life, but also of his

44. The terms of Shelley's self-portrait have been much discussed by critics of *Adonais*, and the traditional accusation that this passage is "a piece of unforgivably indulgent self-pity" has recently yielded to analyses of its strategic effect (Jean Hall, p. 150). See Wasserman's classic defense of the passage (pp. 499–502); Woodman reads it as a parody of the poet-figure who has seen "Nature's naked loveliness" ("Shelley's *Urania*," 72–73); Hall claims "this wandering 'Stranger' is a stranger to himself because he is his own destroyer. At once he plays the roles of pursuer and pursued, hunter and quarry" (p. 150); Heffernan reads it as Shelley's attempt to portray himself as tougher and more enduring than Keats, because he could withstand the hunter's dart (313); Behrendt makes the interesting point that Shelley is "personifying Poetry" with the portrait (p. 254).

own creativity. The passage recalls the notion that poetry is a “transitory brightness” in the mind (described in the *Defence*) that gleams for an instant and then is quenched (p. 504). Furthermore, the flower-sun image in lines 286–87 epitomizes the complicated “or” structure underlying *Adonais*. The image of the smiling “killing sun” that murders the flower not only reflects Keats’s characteristic use of oxymorons (such as in “Ode on Melancholy”); it is also intentionally ambiguous and undecidable. Who is “the withering flower”—Shelley himself or Keats? If the former, then the lines reveal Shelley’s anxious recognition that Keats, as rival genius, acts as both nurturer (the “sun”) and poison (“killing”) to Shelley’s own “withering” creativity. However, if the image is taken as the latter, then Keats-as-flower (his role in *Adonais*) is both nourished and killed by his elegist, Shelley. In the latter, equally valid interpretation, Shelley plays the role of Cain, the original “killing s[o]n,” a subtly punning reference soon to reappear more overtly in stanza 34. Either reading remains possible given the vagueness and complexity of the passage’s imagery; Shelley intends his elegy’s rifts to be loaded with such either/or constructions as a perfect representation and expression of the paradoxical nature of his project.

Such ambiguities culminate in the famous Cain image discussed at the outset: he “made bare his branded and ensanguined brow, / Which was like Cain’s or Christ’s—Oh! that it should be so!” (lines 305–306). Shelley’s use (and defense) of this uncertainty points to a central recognition: instead of subscribing to the traditional role of the elegist as one who brings salvation and immortality to his subject, his position is much darker and more conflicted. The reference to the mark of Cain, on the one hand, connects Shelley himself with the reviewer who “killed” Keats, as it directly echoes an earlier moment: “the curse of Cain / Light on his head who pierced thy innocent breast” (lines 151–52). This linkage reinforces the sense that Shelley sees himself as a critic of Keats who is less than wholly enthusiastic (in his public comments, at least) about Keats’s poetry.<sup>45</sup> Second, he also resembles Cain because he, out of fear and jealousy of his brother’s

45. See Gallant, pp. 148–50, who asserts that Shelley is “secretly included among those ‘viperous’ reviewers,” and because of his guilt about his prior negative treatment of Keats, writes this wholly positive celebration about him.

"flock" (of poems), knowingly seeks to imprison Keats's flame "in marble." Shelley deliberately intertwines the associations of Cain and Christ throughout the fabric of the text in order to create a sustained ambiguity at its very core.

Once Shelley has established his own double role as Keats's elegist, in the last movement of the poem he begins transforming his lost rival from a pale flower into a distant poet who is both a supposedly "immortal" genius he feels drawn towards and an indistinct (and mute) star he is repelled by. But the question of where Keats is now, and where Shelley would be if he joined him, is the unresolved issue that drives the last movement. To explore this issue, Shelley again "disfigures" Keats by using and manipulating the assumptions and tropes of Keats's Odes. In stanza 38, we are told that *Adonais* "wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead" (line 336; my emphasis); this crucial line echoes the final ambiguity of Keats's nightingale Ode: "Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?" (p. 281, line 80). Shelley cunningly appropriates the *unresolved* situation of Keats's own poem and leaves Keats suspended in his own ambivalence for eternity. Shelley refuses to tell the pivotal detail—whether Keats joins the eternal as an active member or remains in an endless paralysis of sleep—and instead rekindles the Keatsian rhetoric in order to settle for indeterminacy. As drawn as he is by Keats's death, what ultimately repels Shelley is the possibility that death means unending sleep with the "enduring dead." He goes on to describe how *Adonais*'s

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*.  
(lines 338–42; my emphasis)

This important passage further illuminates the paradoxical nature of Keats's posthumous situation that draws yet repulses Shelley. As he describes it, Keats's individual spirit (his poetic voice) returns to its source—the Eternal One. The eternal burning fountain of poetic thought is a figure that recalls the "great poem" created by the "one great mind" in the *Defence*. By merging Keats into the One, Shelley blends his rival's identity into the undifferentiated "white radiance of

Eternity" (line 464). Heffernan analyzes this transformation of Keats's identity, and argues that "having turned Keats into an artifice of eternity, Shelley longs to be gathered into it himself" (312). However, Heffernan fails to recognize that Shelley's handling of Keats stems not only from a desire for his own immortality but from a wish to silence and extinguish the flames of his rival. By removing Keats to an eternity where he "must glow through time and change, unquenchably the same," Shelley denies him the "change and motion" enjoyed by the living things—those "unimprisoned flames"—in stanzas 18 and 19. He actually condemns Adonais to remain in stasis like the figures on Keats's own Grecian Urn. Here, Shelley again echoes the tropes and ideas in Keats's poetry only to turn them against their author; he inserts Keats himself into a "Cold Pastoral" that resembles the arrested world on Keats's Grecian urn, where he must stay "unquenchably the same"—immortal but paralyzed, unthreatening and silent.<sup>46</sup>

The final crescendo of the poem begins in stanza 47 with a penetrating self-reference that bears directly on the relationship between the elegist and the elegized: "Who mourns for Adonais? oh come forth / Fond wretch! and know thyself and him aright" (lines 415–16). Shelley's question implicitly hints at the fact that the elegist-as-Cain may not be mourning at all, while his urgent command to understand himself and Keats correctly seems to respond to the network of paradoxes that have formed the poem up to this point. Shelley implies that the time has come to cut through the artificiality and lies of elegy, that the question he must now consider is how to read Keats, how to read himself, and how to know and understand the relationship between two poetic brothers. The poem announces that its scope will now "shrink / Even to a point within our day and night," and move to Rome, to the site of Keats's grave, "which is the sepulchre / O, not of him, but of our joy" (lines 420, 424–25). The figurative language here is employed strategically—it deftly removes Keats from his tomb and substitutes the poet's own joy for the corpse,

46. Heffernan notes a similarly manipulative reading of Keats's poetry several stanzas later. "He is made one with Nature," Shelley says, and Heffernan argues convincingly that "to be consumed by nature . . . is the very last fate Keats would have wished for himself" because to do so would be to become a "sod" (308). Heffernan does not go on to clarify *why* Shelley would make Keats do exactly what he fears (that is, dissolve into nature); my approach to the poem is meant to explain why such rhetorical manipulations occur throughout *Adonais*.



Shelley for Keats, who has now been rhetorically removed from the grave and replaced.

Shelley's description of Rome is as loaded with "ore" (and "or") as any other image in the poem:

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  
 .....  
 . . . over the dead,  
 A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread.  
 (lines 433–41; my emphasis)

This image of Rome is emblematic of the rhetoric of *Adonais*, as it deliberately intertwines Paradise and grave, life and death, flowers and corpses.<sup>47</sup> The poet directs his movements to Rome, the ultimate contradiction: a place where new life grows, feeds on, and laughingly mocks the dead, a place that hints at the eventual decay and burial of all things. By having the long poetic journey of *Adonais* end in Rome, and by describing it as a place of both ruins *and* growth, Shelley deliberately echoes and builds upon the finale of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which similarly ends in that ancient city with an exploration of the ruins as a site of both decay and regenerated creativity. Shelley uses Rome as a paradoxical sign of the enduring immortality of human culture which is in constant tension with the brevity of individual lives such as Keats's and his own. Rome then symbolizes the ruins of the past upon which two things feed simultaneously: "dull Time" which consumes the cemetery walls "like slow fire upon a hoary brand," and creative minds which must feed there in order to create (lines 442–43).

At Keats's graveside, where Shelley has been erecting his own "refuge for his memory," the poem launches into its final bout with the conflicting impulses that have driven it from the start (line 446).

47. On Shelley's depiction of Rome, see Knerr, pp. 99–100, and Cronin, who argues that "Rome" represents "the world" in contrast to "the esoteric paradise among the stars," and "is described as a huge paradox" where "life and death are involved incongruously, paradoxically" (p. 196). Cronin feels that the famous stanza 52 "sorts out" this paradox.

Like Keats poised at the moment when “now more than ever seems it rich to die” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” line 55) Shelley has been “lured . . . to the brink” (line 423). If Keats, in death, is truly free from “that unrest men miscall delight” and “secure” from the ills of the world (stanza 40), and if his spirit and poems have become a portion of the immortal, then, Shelley finally asks, “What Adonais is, why fear we to become?” (line 459). As I have been suggesting, the answers to this gnawing question are painfully apparent to Shelley. First, to *become* Adonais would be to merely “mimic his lips” for eternity, thus sacrificing one’s own distinctive fire (line 132); second, to join Adonais’s “cold repose” would be to lose all “change and motion,” at best to become an imprisoned flame, at worst “a sod” (lines 165, 180), and third, to be “Adonais,” in the sense of the invented figure or the poem itself, would be to become solely a fictive name and an inert text, a dead letter. Finally, Shelley cannot possibly know for certain that Keats in death is “secure” from “the world’s slow stain” or whether such a state is preferable to his own lot at all. Because of these difficult facts, Shelley has avoided *becoming* Keats and dying himself throughout the poem by transforming, manipulating and disfiguring Keats and his words—in short, by playing Cain to Keats’s Abel.

The sweeping momentum of the final four stanzas convinces many critics that Shelley is either launching off from earth into the pure and immortal realm of the imagination in a triumph of art, or that he is succumbing to despair in a kind of “psychic suicide.”<sup>48</sup> While on the most literal level Shelley seems to embark on an apocalyptic and ecstatic journey to join Keats in death, the final stanzas are actually marked by the same ambivalence and self-contradiction that we have seen throughout, rather than exhibiting a spirit of either pure affirmation or pure negation. Life, for Shelley, like the prospect of death, is characterized by irreconcilable forces that produce an utter

48. For some of the many conflicting readings of the poem’s conclusion, see Stuart Curran’s overview, 165; Woodman, who argues that “Shelley committed psychic suicide in *Adonais*” (*Apocalyptic*, p. 158); Jean Hall, who argues that Shelley “dies of rapture,” p. 155; Abbey, who writes that the final voyage is “less a fulfillment of imaginative intimation than an escape from the living mind’s inadequacy” (pp. 117–18); and Wasserman, who claims “the conclusion of the elegy is not the poet’s weak plea for suicide, but a prayer that the limited spiritual existence on earth expand into a pure and infinite spiritual life” (p. 485). James Rieger argues that the end of *Adonais* is literally suicidal and actually prefigures what he sees as Shelley’s deliberate death (*The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* [New York: George Braziller, 1967], pp. 204–205; 221–25).

impasse: "what still is dear / Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither" (lines 473–74). Shelley's attraction to *being* Keats—both writing like him and being dead like him—is exactly as overwhelming as the force which drives him away from being Keats, and both situations are equally deadly. Whereas "Life divide[d]" the two poets—allowing them individuality and poetic independence—"Death can join [them] together" (line 477). This prospect of dying and achieving communion with one he both disapproved of and fears is as much poison as balm.

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.  
(lines 487–95)

The strength of Shelley's hesitation in this famous conclusion has often been overlooked.<sup>49</sup> The passage is actually rife with ambiguity. Is the "breath whose might" Shelley has "invoked in song" a reference to Keats's breath (his literal "inspiration") or a self-reflexive allusion to his own earlier poem "Ode to the West Wind"?<sup>50</sup> Because of this ambiguity, the image further suggests a blurring of Keats's poetry with his own, a confusion as to whether Keats's or his own breath inspires him that Shelley finds as stimulating as it is threatening. Once again, Shelley relies on an unresolvable double allusion. If one reads

49. There are, of course, many important exceptions. For example, Leighton, 163; Heffernan, 313–15; Curran, 178–80; Gallant, pp. 152–53; Ulmer, 449–51; and Tetreault, pp. 231–34 all note the ambivalence of the ending and Shelley's hesitation, though few plumb its depth or adequately locate its sources. Curran still sees the poem as reaching "an impossible but achieved balance" that exhibits "exhilarating, mature joy" (180). I follow Ulmer in believing that poem "goes between emotional antitheses with increasing speed until they collapse together in an identity of yearning and terror" (449). Tetreault's reading of Shelley's equivocal rhetoric is closest to my own, when he notes that "at the moment of decision, images of trepidation undermine the speaker's own testament to transcendence" (p. 232).

50. See Knerr, p. 103, who mentions Neville Roger's reading of the line as a reference to "Ode to the West Wind"; see also Curran, 176 ("this is the only occasion in all of Shelley's poetry where in the body of a poem he directly cites his own canon for reference and meaning").

the “breath” as belonging to Keats, it is notable that this inspiring wind that Shelley has “invoked” (as well as used and refigured throughout this “song”) does not “fill” or “lift” him—like the “breath of Autumn’s being” in “Ode to the West Wind” (p. 221, line 1). Keats’s “breath,” or *influence*, “descends” on Shelley, oppresses him, which, we may recall, mirrors Shelley’s remark in the *Defence* about “the influence which is moved not, but moves” (p. 508). This force, more verbal than physical, pushes the sails of his bark where he does not necessarily wish to go.<sup>51</sup> To give one’s sails to the tempest is an act of courage since it enables one to transcend the “trembling thron’g”; but it is also to shatter earth and sky, to lose the mutability of life, to become “unquenchably the same.” Indeed, the “massy earth and sphered skies” that are rent asunder in the last stanza directly recall Shelley’s earlier reference to the temporal world: “as long as skies are blue, and fields are green, / Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow . . .” (lines 188–89). Once sky and earth are destroyed, and one departs for “the Eternal,” where the “white radiance” burns forever the same, life’s “change and motion” vanish, and one is left to “wake or sleep with the enduring dead,” for better or for worse (lines 165, 336).

Even at the last moment, a veil still separates Adonais from Shelley, and it is the veil of his own imaginative strength, his own poetry and tropes, through which Keats still burns. It is this mediation that enables him to survive, to protect his song from becoming identical to Keats’s own “high requiem” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” line 60). In the end, Shelley attenuates, through metaphor, the figure of Keats to an intangible burning light, only *like* a star, simply a figure of speech, airy and insubstantial.<sup>52</sup> Shelley knows that Keats does not *actually*

51. See Tetreault, esp. pp. 231–34, who similarly argues that “the conclusion of the poem shows the inevitable return of the repressed, now in a dark and fearful form, threatening to bear the speaker away. The rhetorical poet has tried to control language and compel his reader’s assent, but he instead finds that language has seized control of him and forces him to undertake a quest he now would prefer to resist. The poem has turned itself demonically on him” (p. 233). Tetreault is most interested in how Shelley’s stance as “a rhetorical poet” effects the bond between text and reader, and sees this ending as “testing the limits of his language of desire” (p. 234).

52. Peter Sacks makes the relevant point that as a “beacon” Keats is also merely a “sign.” He traces the word to the Old English term for a sign (*beacen*), claiming that this “reinforces our recognition that even while the ‘soul of Adonais’ and its star appear to burn beyond or through the veils of nature or of signification, they nevertheless function precisely as signs” (399). See also Stuart Curran’s compelling

twinkle in the sky, and neither would he himself if he were to join him in death ("oh! that it should be so!"); Keats remains only within this poem, as a trope, as "*Adonais*," for what may possibly be eternity. He has been monumentalized in this memorial, but only as an image; he joins the other great poets only by coming within the "abode" of the text Shelley himself has constructed.

What remains of Keats, awake or asleep, either a distant glow or a mere metaphor, "beacons" from the domain of the Eternal. While the phrase has usually been taken as a sign that Keats *beckons* or guides Shelley into eternity (perhaps because of the aural similarity between "beacon" and "beckon"), readers have consistently overlooked the ambiguity of that key word: to "beacon" is to *warn* as well as to *guide*, since a beacon is a signal fire used to announce an enemy's approach or tell of danger. At the same time that Keats's soul gleams like a star in heaven, guiding Shelley into eternity, it also flashes a warning that an enemy—the jealous, Cain-like fratricide Shelley knows himself to be—approaches, however unwillingly. *Adonais*'s signal light also attests to the danger lying ahead, warning Shelley (who unlike Milton in stanza 4, does not go "unterrified, / Into the gulph of death" but rather goes "darkly, fearfully") not to proceed in that treacherous direction, to resist being consumed into language, text, and death (lines 34–35). Thus, the final gesture of Shelley's poem is "loaded with ore," suspended in paradox—Keats, like all great poets, and like death itself, is both food and poison, host and parasite, friend and enemy. Shelley remains locked in an irreconcilable position, as he has been throughout the elegy, at once irresistibly attracted and overwhelmingly repelled.

Although the end of *Adonais* has frequently been seen as a suicidal, apocalyptic gesture, and a sure prophecy of Shelley's own early death, once the great elegy is complete, Shelley does not immediately commit suicide. In fact, he seems buoyed up by the careful artistry of his poem, which he tells friends again and again is "the least imperfect of

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claim that the end of *Adonais* mirrors the abrupt (unfinished) end of Keats's *Hyperion*, which also portrays a death, "a process of transfiguration" by which Apollo turns into a "a double of line of asterisks, of stars" (179). Finally, Ulmer makes an interesting case for both Shelley's "interweaving of hope and disillusionment" and the "complicity" of language, textuality, and death that shares some ground with the case I make here (447, 449–51).

my compositions.”<sup>53</sup> He also seems vitalized by his own ability to thrive and even capitalize on Keats’s demise. Between the time he learned of Keats’s death, in April 1821, to the days when he had nearly completed *Adonais*, in early June, there is a rather dramatic shift in Shelley’s attitude about his art and his life. On 29 April 1821, shortly after hearing the news, he despondently tells Claire that “I do not write any thing at present. I feel incapable of composition” (p. 288). On 14 May, Shelley writes again to Claire, dwelling at length on his despair (“I have been very ill, body & soul, but principally the latter”) and the imminence of his own death (giving her advice about the future in the event of his “*transmigration*”) (p. 292). But by the time several crucial weeks have passed, the act of writing his elegy seems to have at least temporarily assuaged his suffering, his creative anxieties, and his longing for what Keats had called “easeful Death” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” line 52). On 8 June, the very day he announces to his publisher that he has completed *Adonais*, Shelley writes once more to Claire:

I have a great desire & interest to live, & I would submit to any inconveniences to attain that object. . . . the only relief I find springs from the composition of poetry. . . . I have lately been composing a poem on Keats: it is better than any thing I have yet written, & worthy both of him & of me. (p. 296)

Shelley’s decision to tell his correspondent of his “great desire & interest to live” suggests that he has indeed been “lured to the brink,” perhaps by his “brother’s” death. But while Keats had made that last stride, Shelley had reached the edge only to draw back his hesitating foot. The act of composing *Adonais* allows Shelley to work through his own death as a kind of trope or linguistic possibility, as a contrast to Keats’s very real and very permanent death. The poem itself seems

53. Shelley repeats this exact phrase, among other comments of self-praise, about *Adonais* on many occasions: see, for example, *Letters*, II, 299, 300, 302, 355, 362, 374. It is also clear that Shelley saw *Adonais* as integral to his fate, his future posterity, and that he viewed his own fate as intertwined with Keats’s. “I am especially curious to hear the fate of *Adonais*.—I confess I should be surprised if *that* poem were born to an immortality of oblivion” (*Letters*, II, 365; cf. 372). See Susan Wolfson on the reception of *Adonais*, and its effect on Shelley’s reputation as well as Keats’s (32–37). One effect was that “the self-investment of *Adonais* became more legible as devoted followers claimed the elegy for him alone,” as Shelley became “the sole centre of the fiction he had created” (37).

to act as a metaphorical substitution for Shelley, a stay against his own despair and desire to push off from the shore, and a way of remaining alive instead. Thus, Shelley's death voyage at the end of *Adonais* remains a trope, and Shelley knows it; it is sheer rhetoric, and shot through with such trenchant contradictions that any assertion of self-destruction is undermined. Wherever Keats is, Shelley is not (and I would maintain that Shelley is profoundly skeptical about his fellow poet's posthumous location); that saving fact is ultimately as inspiring as it is tormenting for the surviving poet. Instead of dying, by writing *Adonais*, Shelley—as a poet—re-emerges again into life, however “darkly” and “fearfully”; he is “born” again just like a violet blooming in a cemetery in spring, rather than being “borne” by Keats's breath into extinction.<sup>54</sup>

The figure of Keats becomes the focus of Shelley's deepest conflicts over the problem of poetic influence. More than dismissive or mildly interested in Keats and his poems, Shelley's attitude towards his fellow poet should be viewed as a preoccupation that borders on obsession. Shelley clearly admires, criticizes, envies, and fears this poet “who excel[s] me in genius,” and is “a rival who will far surpass me” (*Letters*, II, 220, 240). He is consistently anxious about “where [Keats] directs his motions,” both physically and aesthetically, and his texts reveal a nearly predatory fascination with (what he calls in a letter to Joseph Severn) “the astonishing remnants of [Keats's] mind” (pp. 280, 366). Six months after writing *Adonais*, Shelley still ponders the fate of Keats's writing, and even seems to hunger for control over Keats's “remnants” and poetic legacy. Intending to collect all of Keats's writing and to write a critical study about his poems (which he never completed), Shelley asks Severn in November 1821: “Has he left any poems or writings of whatever kind, & in whose possession are they?” (p. 366). As we have seen, this same nervous desire to possess and contain his fellow poet colors *Adonais* and virtually all of Shelley's remarks about Keats. This fixation was never to subside in the brief time remaining in Shelley's life: a copy of Keats's 1820 volume was found, fittingly enough, in Shelley's pocket when he drowned just fifteen months after Keats's death, “doubled back, as if the reader, in

54. For an alternative view, see Rieger, who asserts what he terms “the unprovable speculation that Shelley gave in to and thereby cheated what he conceived of as Wrath” (p. 225).

the act of reading, had hastily thrust it away.”<sup>55</sup> That Shelley frequently spoke of his elegy for Keats as being entwined with his own fate, and that he saw some strange link between Keats, Keats’s death, and his own textual and physical legacy, is chillingly illustrated by the fact that Shelley’s actual heart was later found in his wife’s desk, “dried to dust, and wrapped in a copy of *Adonais*.”<sup>56</sup>

If (as Auden remarks) “poetry is the clear expression of mixed feelings,” *Adonais* is surely an exemplary specimen of the genre. Deliberately constructed upon a rhetoric of ambivalence, it is a poem filled to the brim with an “ore” that allows Shelley to resist making stable, univocal assertions about complex subjects that torment him, such as Keats and poetic influence. Shelley’s fascinating relationship with Keats as a person and poet sparks a peculiar drama of equivocation. As Shelley admits in the poem, his “own thoughts . . . / Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey,” and it is this inner conflict that leads nearly every gesture in *Adonais* to be self-divided (278–79). Like Actaeon ripped apart by his own hounds, the poet is violently torn by the conflicted thoughts that he expresses in *Adonais*. Shelley knows his great memorial poem is fueled by the burning star of Keats’s poetry at the same time that it so artfully transforms that flame to marble. He knows it is a flower blossoming over Keats’s corpse, and like a trenchant weed, like any poem, it only exists and survives because it is able to grow from and to vanquish the poets that it feeds upon.

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55. This remark was made by Edward John Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Milford, 1906).

56. Wolfson mentions this “ghoulishly literal application” of the elegy to Shelley himself (37), which is discussed in Newman Ivey White’s *Shelley*, II, 635.n.