

SHELLEY'S "ADONAIIS" AS A PASTORAL ELEGY (1)

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This paper aims chiefly to discuss some salient features of "Adonais" by Percy Bysshe Shelley as an English pastoral elegy such as John Milton's "Lycidas" and Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis." It is well-known that the poem was written to mourn over the premature death of John Keats in Rome in February, 1821. For a full understanding and appreciation of "Adonais" it may be desirable to have some knowledge of Greek myth centering on the Adonis legend, the tradition of pastoral elegy, Shelley's view of Keats and his works, and Shelley's antipathy toward his contemporary reviewer of literary creation.

Although "Shelley's selection of the word 'Adonais' remains a matter of conjecture"¹ there is an interesting and persuasive reference to the title. "The change from Adonis to Adonais was an inspired piece of word-coining. The extra vowel creates a richer and more gracious flavour. The long-drawn final syllables add an elegiac undertone, and 'Adonis' seems curt and flat after 'Adonais.' The metrical problems too are eased by the extra stress — *Ádonais* instead of *Adonis*."²

It is certain that the title "Adonais" comes from the name of a beautiful youth, Adonis beloved by Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility in Greek myth. The Adonis legend is known as follows: When Adonis was killed by a wild boar, the grief of the goddess moved Persephone, Queen of Hades, to allow him to spend six months of the year on earth and six in the underworld. His death and return symbolized winter and summer, and his worship embodied a midsummer festival.³ In a sense, Greek myth had a pastoral atmosphere in its natural climate in which gods and goddesses were wild in their actions as incarnations of their own characters.

Shelley made full use of the pastoral element of Greek myth in his poem. The Adonis legend was centered on the idea that the goddess grieved at the untimely death of the gifted young man. Probably, Shelley thought it proper to apply this idea to the central theme of his elegy. The indirect suggestion of Keats to the mythical youth led Shelley to create a pastoral universe which was much more real and immediate to him than the actual world. He wished to create colorful effects on the death of the talented young poet through the association of poetic ideas. In short, Adonais died before his time in the temporal world, but he came back to life in the universe of myth and legend, with the result that the poem

was composed into a line of pastoral elegy.

There has been a general agreement that the genre of the pastoral originated from "Idylls" by Theocritus in Ancient Greece was established by Vergilius, an Ancient Roman poet. Since then it has been a tradition in Western literature. Its theme is interpreted as follows: the polished person whose life is founded on the city makes his escape from the urban life which is surrounded with degradation and disorder. His wish is to lead a rural life which retains health and simplicity, seeking for an innocent and happy life in its golden age. After all, the pastoral ideal is regarded as the shepherd's life which is free from his labor and obligation in society, enjoying his own happy life.

An ideal pastoral setting is often occupied with similar landscapes such as fertile meadows, abundant blossoms and fruit, tree-shaded gardens, beautiful fountains and brooks, gentle winds and twittering birds in everlasting spring. The setting is called a "pleasant location" or an "ideal scenery." In other words, in pastoral poetry there is a shepherd in the setting of a rural landscape, especially in the meadow. A pastoral elegy means an elegy that goes through such pastoral formality.

It is pointed out that the basic subjects of pastoral elegy are regarded as love, death, and poetry—in particular, death and eternal life are indispensable to the elegy. That is, the dead person enjoys a blessing of eternal life in the heavenly paradise. These subjects lead pastoral poetry to contain the criticism against actual society and border on satirical literature.⁴ In "Adonais," thus, Shelley is severely critical of the reviewer who criticized Keats's work unfavorably as well as that of Shelley. An appreciation of the elegy enables us to recognize that Shelley creates an imaginative, poetic universe, following pastoral precedents, highly conscious of the form of pastoral elegy.

This elegy is generally accepted as one of the finest poems that have been composed in the Spenserian stanza. Shelley's technical mastery of this stanza is explained as follows:

He [Shelley] gives the stanza a music Spenser never knew, and he curbs its aggressive rhymes by running one line into the next and varying the position of the mid-line *caesura*. The long last line of the Spenserian stanza tends to round off the thought expressed, ..., in *Adonais* he is surprisingly obedient to the rule of "one main thought per stanza," so that nearly every stanza is comprehensible on its own.⁵

The Spenserian stanza is known as one of the most complex in English verse form. The meters in the stanza, especially an Alexandrine, present a complicated feeling of sublimity over the dead person as a pastoral elegy. Shelley recognizes that the stanza is suited for "the drowsy, slow-moving effect Spenser is fond of,

or for the solemnity of the stanza ..., with its long, slow close.”⁶ The stanza consists of nine lines, the first eight iambic pentameter and the last iambic hexameter (an Alexandrine), rhyming *a b c b b c b c c*. “The Alexandrine at the close adds dignity to the sweep of the form and, at the same time, affords an opportunity for summary and epigrammatic expression which permits the line to knit up the thought of the whole stanza.”⁷ In the stanza the two couplets *b b* and *c c* can split the stanza into two: *a b c b b* and *c b c c*. Compare the first half with the second. Aside from the very first rhyme *a*, there will be *b c b b*, which rhymes perform a similar function in sound effects to *c b c c*. Furthermore, both rhymes *c* in the first and *b* in the second play an important part in linking the two parts with each other in the sound system of the Spenserian stanza.

Almost all critics agree that the fifty-five stanzas of “Adonais” are roughly classified into two: two-thirds of the poem present a pastoral lament (stanzas 1—37); and the final third present a philosophical consolation (stanzas 38—55).⁸ For instance, the following represents a typical statement: “As commonly analyzed, the elegy consists of two parts: thirty-seven stanzas of mythological narrative, and eighteen stanzas in which the narrative element is apparently abandoned in favor of philosophic consolations.”⁹ But there is a slightly different classification of the elegy. That is, “*Adonais*...falls into two principal movements, with the thirty-eighth stanza marking the point of transition. The last seventeen stanzas are much finer than what precede them.”¹⁰ Such a different view of the classification is due to the interpretation of stanza thirty-eight which implies the attack on the critic just as the preceding stanza thirty-seven does. In other words, there can be no division between these two stanzas.

From another point of view, the elegy can be divided into six stages. They are (1) stanzas 1—8, (2) stanzas 9—21, (3) stanzas 22—29, (4) stanzas 30—38, (5) stanzas 39—46, and (6) stanzas 47—55. Each of them is considered to have an organic stage making a new thematic development.

The opening stage can be composed of the first eight stanzas which address the Hour of Adonais’ death and continue the appeal to the goddess Urania to mourn over the death of her beloved son Adonais as quickly as she can. Thus the words grieving over the deceased deserve a special notice. Above all, several refrains attract our attention. First, have a look at the following mourning words: “I weep for Adonais” in the very first line of the opening stanza. The core word “weep” is frequently used—for example, “weep for Adonais” (stanzas 1 and 3), “weep again” (stanza 4), and “weep anew” (stanzas 5 and 6). Such repetition of the word “weep” in almost every line in the opening stage emphasizes the significance of the word for a lyrical lament over Adonais’ fate. At the same time,

this lament implies that Shelley admits the death of Keats as an undeniable fact. This fact is often repeated directly and indirectly as follows: “he is dead” (stanzas 1 and 3); “with me/Died Adonais” (stanza 1); “He died” (stanza 4); “he went, unterrified,/ Into the gulf of death” (stanza 4); “But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished” (stanza 6); “He lies, as if in dewy sleep he lay” (stanza 7); and “He will awake no more, oh, never more!” (stanza 8).

Then, several other repeated words are worthy of notice—addressing “thou, sad Hour” (stanza 1), “thou, mighty Mother” (stanza 2), “melancholy Mother” (stanza 3) and “Most musical of mourners” (stanzas 4, 5 and 6). The first addressing word, “thou, sad Hour” is interpreted like this: in the first stanza “Shelley asks the Hour of Adonais’ death to rouse the Hours of the Future and teach them to preserve ‘his fate and fame’ until eternity.”¹¹ In this stanza we find some suggestion that condemns the reviewer who was thought to have hastened the death of Keats. Notice lines 2–3, for instance, “though our tears/ Thaws not the frost which binds so dear a head!” These lines are capable of containing some symbolic meaning. The word “frost” symbolizes some cold-hearted reviewer who had killed the mind and body of the young Keats with his malicious, unfavorable criticism.

The other three addressing words lay stress upon the rhyme of /m/ sound as alliteration echoing a sort of warm, soft, or suggestive sound which has an acoustic image of an affectionate mother who is bereft of her son. They are directed toward one and the same goddess “Urania” (stanzas 2 and 4), another name for Aphrodite. Aphrodite Urania is the goddess of heavenly love in classical mythology. “By exalting her status and making Adonais her son, he [Shelley] robs the Venus-Adonis myth of its erotic element, which would have been out of place in an elegy.”¹²

Next, let us see the second stanza:

Where wert thou, mighty Mother, when he lay,
 When thy Son lay, pierced by the shaft which flies
 In darkness? where was lorn Urania
 When Adonais died?...

(lines 10–13)

According to the elegaic convention, Shelley reproves the goddess, questioning her “Where wert thou, mighty Mother where he lay?” and “Where was lorn Urania/ When Adonais died?” The lines “the shaft which flies/ In darkness” imply that Adonais was mortally wounded by an anonymous attack. In other words, they suggest that Keats was wounded to death by the anonymous review in the *Quarterly*.¹³ In short, Shelley makes plain in this passage “how he is going to use the Adonis legend. As in the myth Venus mourns her son Adonis, slain by the

boar, so Shelley's Urania mourns her son Adonais, killed by that wild beast the reviewer, whose shaft 'flies in darkness' because he is anonymous."¹⁴

We will consider Shelley's view of John Keats. Here is the fourth stanza.

He died,
Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
of lust and blood; he went, unterrified,
Into the gulf of death; but his clear Sprite
Yet reigns o'er earth; the third among the sons of light. (lines 29—36)

"The lines refer to the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy and the killing of those responsible for the execution of Charles I."¹⁵ Thus, "the Sire of an immortal strain" was John Milton. Shelley seems to admire him as the father of an immortal poetry. The words "Blind, old, and lonely" are associated with the mental and physical condition of Milton's closing years. Shelley alludes to this senior poet, emphasizing his "prominence by placing him third among 'the sons of light.'"¹⁶ Shelley implies to criticize his own country and the people of each social class that did not understand but censure Shelley as well as Milton and Keats by many unjust authorities. Such wrong powers hastened the end of Keats. He might die in mental agony of loneliness, but he encountered death as if he were a literary martyr. Thus, his soul inhabited in the celestial paradise and shined over the earth. In short, Keats died in the mundane world, but his soul enjoyed an eternal life in the immortal world, like Milton.

Let us see the fifth stanza which makes no reference to the lamentable death of Adonais except for the first line. The stanza is as follows:

Most musical of mourners, weep anew!
Not all to that bright station dared to climb;
And happier they their happiness who knew,
Whose tapers yet burn through that night of time
In which suns perished; others more sublime,
Struck by the envious wrath of man or God,
Have sunk, extinct in their refulgent prime;
And some yet live, treading the thorny road,
Which leads, through toil and hate, to Fame's serene abode. (lines 37—45)

In this passage lines 39—41 have been interpreted "to mean that minor poets ("tapers") whose works survive are more content than those major poets

(“suns”) whose compositions have perished.”¹⁷ In line 44 “the ‘some’ who yet live possibly include Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley himself.”¹⁸ The passage implies, however, that Keats attains a lofty stage of artistic activity as a young poet and that his death causes English poetry to extinguish its golden days and some living poets to exert themselves to compose their poems, “treading the thorny road.”

We will proceed to the following sixth stanza:

The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew
Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;
The broken lily lies—the storm is overpast. (lines 52—54)

“With each returning spring Hyacinthus, to whose alteration these lines refer, blooms to revive the memory of his death at Apollo’s hand. Even the word ‘broken’ is allusive, for it describes how this dying youth hung his head like a broken-stemmed lily flower.”¹⁹ Although “the image of the premature death of the bloom is a common one,”²⁰ the life of Keats is analogous to the lily that is nipped in severe cold before opening its beautiful flowers and bearing its fruit. The word “lily” means a flower which is white, pure, beautiful but fragile. In short, these lines are regarded as an extended metaphor, whose tenor is that Keats ended his short life before “the flowering of his poetic genius.”

Now, let us turn our attention to the rhythm in the opening six stanzas which produce an exclamatory tone. If we read these lines aloud, we can hear many diphthong and long vowel sounds echoing predominantly in almost every line. In other words, those vowels are prevalent on more than half or nearly two-thirds of the stressed syllables. Also, end-rhyme of each line tells that almost all the rhyming words have diphthongs and long vowels. That is, these words resound at the end of each line in the first two stanzas and at that of the two-thirds lines in the last four. Thus, all these long vowels produce the slow movement which is appropriate to the motif of “Adonais”: the lament for the dead youth and the repose of his soul.

In the lines of the six stanzas there are numbers of punctuation—commas, semi-colons, colons, and question and exclamation marks—which cause us to make a number of pauses inside these lines. It is clear that these pauses contribute to slow down the movement of the lines. For example, the first three stanzas have one or more pauses in each line. All the lines have pauses in the sixth stanza—above all, we make four pauses inside line 46. Thus, we understand that almost each line of these stanzas has one or more pauses which lead to make the slow movement in this section.

The following lines are an instance of making pauses which deserves a special notice. Here is the fourth stanza:

Blind, old, lonely, when his country's pride,
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
of lust and blood; he went, unterrified, (lines 31—34)

This passage we have already quoted as a suggestion of Shelley's view of John Keats. In these lines we have to make a short pause after every comma and before the words "with a many loated rite" in the meaning of line 33. We also have a longer pause after the semi-colon in line 34. Thus, there are nine short pauses and a longer one in these 31—34 lines. Each of these pauses slows the movement up in every line.

It is true that rhythm in poetry is different in its function from sound, but both are not separated but united with each other in verse form. In the six stanzas we are discussing there are a variety of vowel and consonant sounds in the use of many classes of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and end-rhyme. In our discussion about these rhyming words we need to analyze the classes of assonance and end-rhyme to distinguish short vowels from long ones and diphthongs. Similarly, it is necessary to analyze the classes of alliteration and consonance to examine the effects of consonants. All these "repeated sounds" are echoed in almost every line of these stanzas.

Let us discuss the sound effects of each stanza of these six. In stanza 1 main rhyming words resound in long vowels /i:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, diphthongs /ai/, /au/, /ei/, and consonants /d/, /f/, /s/. Probably, these sounds contribute to make a heavy and slow movement in death-like silence in the stanza. In the other stanzas there are such important rhymed sounds as /ai/, /ei/, and /d/ in stanza 2; /i:/, /ai/, /au/, and /d/ in stanza 3; /ə:/, /ai/, /ou/, and /d/, /l/, /m/ in stanza 4; /i:/, /ai/, /ei/ in stanza 5; /u:/, and /l/, /st/ in stanza 6. These long vowels and diphthongs as well as these consonants can be called dominant sounds in this section. The consonant sounds /d/, /l/, and /m/ suggest to have tone-colors such as "dark" and "heavy," "liquid" and "calm," and "warm" and "soft," respectively. The acoustic fusion of these vowels and consonants may be harmonious with the meaningful allusion to the early death of John Keats, the mild reproof of Urania, the condemnation of the anonymous reviewer of Keats's work.

In stanzas 7 and 8 there are some common elements in rhythm. The pauses inside the lines make their frequent and irregular appearance. At several times there is no pause at the end of a line. Such an irregular movement of the verse

may have some relation to the meaning of these stanzas.

The seventh stanza forces us to notice that the elegy alludes to Rome where Keats is buried. This stanza begins like this:

To that high Capital, where kingly Death
Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay,
He came; and bought, with price of purest breath,
A grave among the eternal.—Come away! (lines 55—58)

The “high Capital” is interpreted as Rome, and “‘Death’s pale court’ suggests the tubercular patients in Rome and Keats’s death there of tuberculosis.”²¹ In line 58 “the ‘eternal’ suggests both Rome, the eternal city, and the many famous people buried there....‘Come away!’ is addressed to those gathered around the body of Adonais rather than to Urania.”²² The speaker stops to deplore the death of Adonais and suggests that his soul has attained a lofty place wrapped in a peaceful sleep in the immortal world. Shelley sings, “Awake him not! surely he takes his fill / of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all.” (lines 62—63) In his deep sleep Adonais is enjoying an eternal repose, setting his soul free from a hard living during his lifetime.

In the following eighth stanza Shelley suggests the plain fact that Keats cannot be physically revived, describing as if he were in an eternal sleep. This stanza begins in an impressive refrain:

He will awake no more, oh, never more!—
Within the twilight chamber spreads apace,
The shadow of white Death,... (lines 64—66)

Line 64 is repeated as the refrain on line 190, stanza 22. This refrain is very effective in sound: double alliteration /n/ and /m/ sounds. The former sound suggests light and rebound elasticity and the latter implies to convey warm, soft, and suggestive feelings. These complicated sound effects emphasize that Keats will never revive forever. Lines 65—66 “imply that Keats’s body is still lying in the room where he died (‘the twilight chamber’) and that it has not yet been buried.”²³ This stanza continues as follows:

The eternal Hunger sits, but pity and awe
Soothe her pale rage, nor dares she to deface
So fair a prey, till darkness, and the law
Of change, shall o’er his sleep the mortal curtain draw. (Lines 69—72)

These lines suggest that the corpse of Adonais was not corrupted but purified in the last deep slumber.

As we have seen, most of the opening lament is the appeal to Aphrodite Urania to come over to the dead Adonais immediately as the chief mourner. This lament indicates that Shelley adheres to the tradition of pastoral poetry. It has been pointed out that Shelley's "Adonais" is influenced by the poems of his senior poets such as Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and others. In particular, the refrain, repeated with variations in stanzas 3, 4, 5, and 6, is closely modeled on Bion and Moschus.²⁴ Shelley might have been under the influence of these poets when he composed the elegy on John Keats. But this poem was also composed by Shelley's own creative imagination. For instance, his originality is revealed in the implication of the languor—drowsy feeling—of Urania in the following lines: "With veiled eyes, / 'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise / She sate," (lines 13—15); "Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!" (line 20) In short, the opening stage may resound not only the mental state of Urania but the deep sleeping condition of the dead Adonais as well. It can be said that Shelley succeeded in making the most use of the Spenserian stanza to create an inspiring solemnity in meters, sound, and rhythm in "Adonais."

NOTES

1. Edwin B. Silverman, *Poetic Synthesis in Shelley's Adonais* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), p.102.
2. Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (London: Macmillan, 1964), p.305.
3. *The Cowles Comprehensive Encyclopedia* (New York: Cowels Educational Books, 1964), p.268.
4. 平川泰司著, 「パストラルの伝統」, 『英文学を学ぶ人のために』坂本完勝編 (京都: 世界思想社, 1987年), 67頁。
5. King-Hele, p.313.
6. Laurence D. Lerner, *English Literature: An Interpretation for Students Abroad* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p.82.
7. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook To Literature* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), pp. 506—7.
8. See Milton Wilson, *Shelley's Later Poetry: A Study of His Prophetic Imagination* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), p.248. See also Silverman, p.31.
9. Carol Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of A Vision* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p.246.
10. Harold Bloom, "The Two Spirits," *Shelley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. George M. Ridenour (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p.163.
11. Wilson, p.242.

12. King-Hele, p.305.
13. Anthony D. Knerr, *Shelley's Adonais: A Critical Edition* (New York: Colombia Univ. Press, 1984), p.63.
14. King-Hele, p.304.
15. Knerr, p.65.
16. *Ibid.*, p.66.
17. *Ibid.*, p.67.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Child Walcutt & J. Edwin Whiteshell, ed. *The Explicator Cyclopedia Vol. II, The Traditional Poetry: Medieval to Late Victorian* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), p.296.
20. Knerr, p.68.
21. *Ibid.*, p.69.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p.61.