

# Turning to Dante: Shelley's *Adonais* Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

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As often, if not always, in his agonistic creative relationship with Shelley, Byron just about got there first in terms of responding to something of the imaginative range offered by Dante's example, even if the roughly contemporaneous *Prometheus Unbound* is a more impressive instance of a comparable phenomenon. In *The Prophecy of Dante*, composed in 1819 but published in 1821, Byron writes from the persona of Dante: a bold move that allows for a sense of veiled autobiography. In places we suspect we are dealing with the Noble Lord as much as the Florentine poet. 'For I have been too long and deeply wreck'd / On the lone rock of desolate Despair' (l. 138–139) catches the throwing-it-all-to-the-winds cadence of for 'I have thought / Too long and darkly, till my brain became, / In its own eddy boiling and o'er wrought, / A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame' of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (3. 55–58).<sup>2</sup> Again

1. This essay is in dialogue with ideas developed in previous essays by me, notably 'Realms without a Name: Shelley and Italy's Intenser Day', in *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (eds), New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 77–91, and three essays in the *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*: 'Cathestant or Protholic? Shelley's Italian Imaginings', 6, 2001, pp. 153–168; 'Fashioned from His Opposite: Yeats, Dante and Shelley' 8, 2006, pp. 149–171; '"Admirable for Conciseness and Vigour": Dante and Romantic Epic', 10, 2009, pp. 15–27. For helpful comments on a draft, I should like to thank Alan Weinberg.
2. All quotations from Byron are taken from *The Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron* Jerome J. McGann (ed.) (7 vols), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980–1988, here vols. 4 and 2, respectively.

the first canto of *The Prophecy of Dante* rakes over the still burning coals of the separation from Lady Byron as it closes with a sardonic reference to 'that fatal she' (I. 172), the mother of his children, 'who hath brought / Destruction for a dowry' (I. 173–174). The feelings of Byron's Dante are mixed: he has been 'taught / A bitter lesson' (I. 175–176), but he affirms his essential freedom: 'it leaves me free: / I have not vilely found nor basely sought, / They Made an Exile—not a slave of me' (I. 176–178). The poem is saved from tame postures of deference by such acts of appropriation.

Ways in which Byron and Shelley overlap in their response to Dante include a sense that Dante puts the poetic self at the centre of a poem, not to indulge ego, but to record experience, especially experience that can be called visionary. At the same time, what is recorded in Dante can be the poet's often at least half-admiring response to speakers who very much put their ego to the fore. Shelley's portrait of Rousseau as someone preoccupied by the self is an instance of the Italian poet's influence here. Shelley catches Rousseau's conviction, one never wholly dismissed by the poem, that his is the exemplary fate of modern subjectivity; he asserts that he 'was overcome / By my own heart alone' (241–242), and that 'I'—the word held in towering aloneness at the end of a line 'Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!' (279–280).<sup>3</sup> Byron and Shelley share, too, an artistic awareness that *terza rima* can be adapted to English, especially in the service of onward flowing feeling, a stream of sensation being central to both poets' desire to leave behind custom and tradition even as they draw from them what they think is most valuable. Shelley, in particular, realises that *terza rima* can be adapted to a vision of experience that is alive to possibility and resistant to closure. Moreover, they respond to Dante in a fashion that allows them to challenge British philosophical and cultural traditions: Dante charts a trajectory that to a Romantic-period reader looks like a move from seen to unseen, empiricism to idealism, a movement that Byron evokes in the opening of *The Prophecy of Dante*. It is typical of the poetry's ambivalence, however, that he recalls 'the base / Of the eternal Triad' (I. 12–13) from the perspective of being 'Once more in man's frail world!' (I. 1). Finally,

3. Qtd. from *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (eds), 2003, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009 reissue. All quotations from Shelley's prose (apart from his letters) and poetry are taken from this edition (page numbers are provided in parenthesis for prose quotations).

they evolve an awareness of Dante as a poet of liberty.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in places Dante emerges as a precursor of modern hopes for unification. A long section in canto 2 of Byron's poem discusses the present-day ignominy and tyranny suffered by Italians and ends with the vision: 'we, / Her sons, may do this with *one* deed—Unite!' (2. 144–145).<sup>5</sup>

Shelley appears to have read Byron's poem in August 1821, after its publication in April 1821, and admired it greatly. He told Byron that its poetry was 'indeed sublime.'<sup>6</sup> It certainly leaves an impression on *The Triumph of Life* in the lines about 'the sacred few, who could not tame / Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon / As they had touched the world with living flame / Fled back like eagles to their native noon' (128–131). The lines recall, as Charles Robinson notes, those 'birds of Paradise' (3. 169) 'form'd of far too penetrable stuff' (3. 170) in Byron's poem who 'long to flee / Back to their native mansion' (3. 169–170); 'soon they find / Earth's mist with their pure pinions not agree' (3. 70–171).<sup>7</sup> And he would have been struck, as Robinson suggests, by analogues with his recent thinking about poetry in *A Defence of Poetry* and *Adonais*, works deeply concerned with Dante. The lines in question, Robinson comments, 'anticipated [Shelley's] own images in *Adonais* where earth's "mist" and "the contagion of the world's slow stain" were "outsoared" by Keats, who had also been formed of "penetrable stuff"', a phrase quoted in Shelley's Preface to his elegy.<sup>8</sup> Yet Shelley blurs distinctions between realms, as Greg Kucich notes in relation to *The Revolt of Islam*'s 'modifying'—a modifying that is, in Kucich's view only partly successful—of 'Spenser's dichotomous vision.'<sup>9</sup> He tugs this-worldly metaphors and figures into the dimension of an other-worldly

4. Lilla Maria Crisafulli quotes Luigi Rava as drawing attention to the 'Ode to Liberty' as evidence of Shelley's support for Italian 'political aspirations', 'Shelley's Afterlife in Italy: from 1822 to 1922', in *The Reception of Shelley in Europe*, Suzanne Schmid and Michael Rossington (eds), London, Continuum, 2008, p. 50n.
5. For the view that 'When Byron and Shelley turn to Dante in Italy, they advertise an extreme self-consciousness about their position between two cultures and outside the orthodox faith of both', see Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic and Victorian Writers in Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 100.
6. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Frederick. L. Jones (ed.) (2 vols), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, II. p. 347.
7. Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp. 180–181.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 182.
9. Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*, University Park PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, p. 283.

eternity, and suggests not only that eternity must be shadowed forth through temporal means, but also that it is in time that visions of eternity can and must be experienced.

*Adonais* typifies Shelley's view of poetry as engaged in creative response to previous poetry. Again, Kucich is helpful, allowing us to grasp the complexity of Shelley's journey towards such a creative response, one that involves jettisoning judgements about a previous poet on solely ideological grounds.<sup>10</sup> This jettisoning is evident in the assertion that 'Didactic poetry is my abhorrence' in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (p. 232) and in the account in *A Defence of Poetry* of Dante and Milton as great poets whose explicit and 'distorted notions of invisible things' are 'merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised' (p. 691). *Adonais* achieves a capacious if often conflicted openness to tradition; it is steeped in classical elegiac conventions, drawing on Shelley's translation of Bion's elegy for Adonis. Its Spenserians pay graceful tribute to Spenser's 'Astrophel', an oblique tribute since Spenser does not use his nine-line stanza in that poem. They also bring to mind Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which Vincent Newey sees as a spur to Shelleyan emulousness in the poem, the later stanzas in particular revealing for Newey a Shelleyan 'drive to *outdistance* Byron.'<sup>11</sup> It is full of allusions to Keats, as Kelvin Everest has effectively demonstrated. As Everest writes, the poem 'deliberately celebrates Keats's claims to classic status, and honours in ceremonially formal terms the seriousness and scale of his achievement.'<sup>12</sup> And it shares with Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante* a fascination with creativity, of a kind for which Dante turns into an exemplar. Thus Byron, in the guise of Dante, writes:

For what is poesy but to create  
From overflowing good or ill; and aim  
At an external life beyond our fate,  
And be the new Prometheus of new men,  
Bestowing fire from heaven, and then, too late,  
Finding the pleasure given repaid with pain,  
And vultures to the heart of the bestower [...] (IV. 1–17)

10. See the discussion of Shelley and influence in Kucich, pp. 285–289.

11. Vincent Newey, 'Shelley and the Poets: *Alastor*, "Julian and Maddalo", *Adonais*', in 'Shelley Special Issue', guest ed. Michael O'Neill, *Durham University Journal* n.s. 54 (1993), pp. 257–271 (p. 266).

12. Kelvin Everest, 'Shelley's *Adonais* and John Keats', *Essays in Criticism*, 57 (2007), pp. 237–264 (p. 238).

The lines have that quality of reflective, near-metaphysical surprise characteristic of some of Byron's best writing. They say fine things almost unintentionally, to adapt Keats on Shakespeare's sonnets,<sup>13</sup> driven by the imperatives of rhyme and rhythm as they move from imagining what it might be 'to create' to sensing 'An external life beyond our fate', before a further rhyme, 'too late', quenches aspiration in disillusion. The way in which the thought develops through the *terza rima* has a post-Dantescan blend of cognitive assurance and capacity for novelty.

Shelley, by 1821, is close to and yet far from this position: close, in that he has asserted in *A Defence of Poetry*, that it is not a poet's duty to 'embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither' (p. 682); far, in that he would prefer still not to believe in the pessimism which clouds Byronic affirmation, the belief that, 'too late', unwelcome discovery lies in wait for the Promethean poet who would redefine our fate through his power to create.<sup>14</sup> Shelley still, in theory at any rate, emphasises the collective benefit rather than the personal pain of poetry: 'It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought' (p. 681). Those 'combinations' include the way in which poet and predecessors combine in the process of producing new creations.

Shelley expresses his belief in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that 'one great poet is a masterpiece of nature which another not only ought to study but must study.' Dante increasingly had come to the fore as the type of such a 'great poet', inspiring Shelley's own tropes for influence and crystallising his remarkable readiness to confront the process of influence head-on rather than merely to accept it as a practice not brought into full consciousness: 'Dante', writes Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, 'was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language in itself music and persuasion out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor' (p. 693).

The 'Ashes and sparks' (66) of 'Ode to the West Wind', along with the 'fire for which all thirst' (485), the 'burning fountain' (339) and 'fire'

13. See *The Letters of John Keats*, H.E. Rollins (ed.) (2 vols), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1958, I, p. 188.

14. Robinson argues that, for all his admiration for *The Prophecy of Dante*, 'Shelley sensed that Byron once more condoned the immoral effects of ... despair', p. 184.

that 'outlives its parent spark' (408) of *Adonais*, find their source in the burning atoms of Dante's 'inextinguishable thought.' 'Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda' (From a small spark / Great flame hath risen), writes Dante in *Paradiso* 1, 34 and Shelley's work responds to this invitation to be influenced.<sup>15</sup> Cary's note to the line, or lines in translation, refers to Pindar's third Pythian Ode, lines 67-8, as if to point up the process of influence.<sup>16</sup> Pindar writes (in English translation): 'As from one fatal spark arise / The flames aspiring to the skies, / And all the crackling wood consume.'<sup>17</sup>

To re-read the first canto of the *Paradiso* alone is to be reminded of why Shelley exalted this *cantica*.<sup>18</sup> Echoes aside, one of which will be discussed later, it is the daring and radiance of the writing from which Shelley seems to have drawn inspiration and to which he is, of all poets writing in English, the most evidently attuned by poetic temperament. Dante's sense of the hardness of his task; his appeal to Apollo and the reminder of the god's flaying of Marsyas; the divine cosmology with Beatrice looking at the sun; the Glaucus-like moment of 'transhuman' apprehension (see l. 71); the concern to avoid, yet readiness to confront, 'falso imaginar' (false imagination, as Cary has it, or 'imagining') (88); the rapturously fluent account of 'lo gran mar dell'essere' (the vast sea of being) (113); the metaphysics of form and matter (127-129): to all these beautifully connected units of vision Shelley would have been uniquely responsive. When Rachel Jacoff writes of Dante's *Paradiso*, 'The impossibility of directly rendering that reality [that is, of Paradise] turns

15. Dante original cited from Temple Classics edition of the *Commedia*, Philip H. Wicksteed (ed.) (3 vols), London, Dent, 1904. Translations into English are from *The Vision; or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*. trans. Henry Francis Cary, 3 vols (2<sup>nd</sup> edn. corr.) with the Life of Dante, Additional Notes, and an Index, London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819. There are problems with Cary's translation, but as the translation most widely used by second-generation Romantic poets it has considerable historical interest. Shelley, who appeared to read Cary, but soon began reading Dante in Italian, would, it is presupposed here, have viewed Cary's version as both invaluable and not wholly adequate. For further discussion of Cary and Shelley, see Antonella Braidà, *Dante and the Romantics*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Ch. 4, pp. 95-127. For the influence of Dante's line, see Alan M. Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience*, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 195.

16. Cary, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 5n.

17. *Pindar*, trans. C.A. Wheelwright, London, Colburn and Bentley, 1830.

18. 'The acutest critics', he writes in *A Defence of Poetry*, 'have justly reversed the judgement of the vulgar and the order of the great acts of the "Divine Drama" in the measure of the admiration which they accord to the Hell, Purgatory and Paradise', p. 691.

out to have its positive value in the ways it liberates the poet for “making signs” with increasing freedom from any purely mimetic imperative’,<sup>19</sup> the reader of Shelleyan poems such as *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion* will wish to redirect her comment as illuminating about the Romantic poet’s practice, too. One might even be tempted to find in Dante, as in some Bloomian critical manoeuvre that would reverse linearity, a Shelleyan dimension. So, Richard Harter Fogle writes that ‘the first experience of the Empyrean Heaven [in *Paradiso* 30] is clothed in a garb which considering my point of view I hope I may be pardoned for calling highly Shelleyan.’<sup>20</sup> Fogle’s phrasing is subtly attentive to ways in which a later writer can fulfil an earlier one, so that the earlier writer’s achievement seems incomplete without the later writer’s. It reminds us, moreover, of the truly comic dimension of the *Paradiso* in which wrongs are made right and true happiness discovered, and where poetic justice passes into moments that joyfully exceed human apprehension, as in the redemption of the Trojan Ripheus (Riphaeus, in Shelley’s spelling). Shelley’s purpose in singling out the surprising decision to include Ripheus (see *A Defence of Poetry*, 691) is to hint at Dante’s imaginative capacity to exceed his poem’s framework of beliefs; the comic nature of the *Paradiso* lies in the freedom it embodies within itself and imparts to others to escape the handcuffs of ideological conviction. The eagle declares to the pilgrim-poet:

Chi crederebbe giù nel monde errante,  
che Rifeo Troiano in questo tondo  
fosse la quinta delle luci sante?

ora conosce che in aere si spazia  
veder non può della divina grazia,  
benchè sua vista non discerna il fondo

(Who in the erring world beneath would deem,  
That Trojan Ripheus in this round was set  
Fifth of the saintly splendours? now he knows  
Enough of that, which the world cannot see,  
The grace divine, albeit e’en his sight  
Reach not its upmost depth.)

19. Rachel Jacoff, “‘Shadowy Prefaces’: An Introduction to *Paradiso*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, Rachel Jacoff (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 210.

20. Richard Harter Fogle, ‘Dante and Shelley’s *Adonais*’, *Bucknell Review*, 15.3: (1967), pp. 11–21, p. 12.

Ripheus cannot understand the reach of 'grace divine', and Shelley might say, in thinking about the episode, that Dante extends a 'grace' towards subsequent readers. The strangeness of the decision to place Ripheus in Paradise acts as an analogue to the fact that a medieval Catholic poem can serve as a stimulus to a second-generation English Romantic poet, with little love of Christian hierarchies and orthodoxies—yet with a passion for similitudes and a reverence for processes of desire and longing that are honoured in Dante's subsequent tercets (73–78).

The genius of influence must work itself out in a poet in multiple ways. 'All high poetry is infinite' (p. 693), Shelley declares, straight after his praise of Dante in *A Defence of Poetry*, and the *Commedia* is clearly in his mind; 'new relations are ever developed' (p. 693), Shelley asserts, and an example is *Adonais*. The *Commedia* itself contains a number of encounters with previous poets. Dante depends on Virgil as his guide. In *Purgatorio* 21 he participates in a triangulated scene of poetic encounter when Statius is told by him that the figure in front of him is indeed Virgil. In *Purgatorio* 22 he listens to the poets talking 'ch' a poetar mi davano intelletto' (that to my thoughts conveyed / Mysterious lessons of sweet poesy) (129). In *Adonais* Shelley seems, as in some proto-Joycean Oxen of the Sun episode, to be running through a gamut of possible poetic styles—not in that there is any effect of continuous parody, but in that the poet seems, in his 'highly wrought *piece of art*',<sup>21</sup> as he calls it, to be assuming and then quietly discarding or transforming styles of dealing with the world, with death and with what that grim fact makes of life. The 'unapprehended combinations of thought' include an attempt to redefine what elegy is capable of, as we move from Bion's *Lament* through echoes of Milton, Keats, Spenser, and others, towards the final ascent where Dante comes to the fore.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed it is possible to make the poem's trajectory seem like a relatively smooth series of progressive revelations, as in Wasserman's account, or a blueprint for Shelleyan process, as in Hogle's reading.<sup>23</sup>

21. Shelley, *Letters*, II, p. 294.

22. For more detail about these allusions, see *The Poems of Shelley: Volume Four: 1820–1821*, Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan and Kelvin Everest (eds), London, Longman, 2014, pp. 235–345.

23. See Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971 and Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988. Wasserman writes that the final movement of the poem 'will be the fulfilment of implications latent in the first two', p. 472, and Hogle argues that 'the stages of



Alan Weinberg suggestively sees the poem's three stages as 'conforming to the progressive structure of the *Commedia*: the first (stanzas 1 to 17) corresponds to the *Inferno*; the second (stanzas 18 to 37) corresponds to the *Purgatorio*; and the third (stanzas 38 to 55) to the *Paradiso*.'<sup>24</sup> These approaches helpfully adumbrate Shelley's realisation of the triadic possibilities present in Dante's poem. They encourage one, too, to search out those moments when Shelley departs from Dante and works in ultimately unsystemisable ways; indeed, Weinberg comments that 'The Dantean framework is not rigidly defined' and he prefaces his description of the structural parallels by pointing out the all-important difference between the 'linear narrative structure' in Dante and 'the antithetical lyrical structure' in Shelley.<sup>25</sup>

Even if the *Inferno* analogy prompts us to reflect that Dante's subject is sin and Shelley's mortality, it might prompt us also to detect unexpected continuities. Sin might be said to enter the poem explicitly when Shelley, picking up his condemnation in the Preface of a reviewer's malignity, expresses his contempt for the 'envy, hate, and wrong' (321) which 'was howling in one breast alone' (322). But when sin does enter the poem, Shelley treats it with a curious empathy. He condemns the reviewer to feel complex emotions of self-abhorrence: 'Remorse and Self-contempt' (331) and 'shame' (332). The fitting punishment is for the reviewer to 'be thyself, and know thyself to be!' (328). He is condemned, that is, as Shelley adapts a Dantean severity of charity to his own ends, to a form of spiritual advancement. Even if it sounds uncannily close to Dantean *contrapasso*, the authorial imperative implicitly departs from Dante's 'distribution of rewards and punishments' (*A Defence of Poetry*, 691)—though one might argue that Dante's sinners 'are', without knowing fully why they are. A few stanzas later, Shelley will supply a paradisaal redefinition of death as a space free from 'Envy and calumny and hate and pain, / And that unrest which men miscall delight' (353–354), and throughout *Adonais* the paradisaal and the potentially infernal or purgatorial are unstably in contact.

Shelley works, as Weinberg implies, by unpredictable leaps rather than precise steps, responding with liberal creativity to Dante's own

Shelley's *Adonais* [...] appear to rise through the levels of Christian allegory as listed and applied by Dante', though he sees Shelley's poem as being at odds with 'Catholic (or any official Christian) theology', p. 318.

24. Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

25. *Ibidem*.

invitation to operate through sublime poetic aspiration in *Paradiso*, canto 23:

E così, figurando il Paradiso,  
convien saltar lo sacro poema  
come chi trova suo cammin reciso. (61–63)

(And with such figuring of Paradise,  
The sacred strain must leap, like one, that meets  
A sudden interruption to his road.)<sup>26</sup>

Dante was there before Shelley, so Shelley must have delightedly discovered, reading these lines. Indeed, just preceding the passage, Dante speaks of himself thus:

Io era come quei, che si risente  
di vision obblita, e che s'ingegna  
indarno di ridularsi alla mente (49–51)

(I was as one, when a forgotten dream  
Doth come across him, and he strives in vain  
To shape it in his fantasy again)

Shelley manages, throughout *Adonais*, to shape in his 'fantasy again' the 'forgotten dream' of Dantean imaginings. In the lines about the 'sacred poem' (a phrase repeated in the first line of canto 25), Dante recognises that he is engaged in the process of 'figuring', shadowing forth, finding poetic equivalents. Shelley's own 'sudden leap' is in the direction of a 'sacred strain', but one that is sung by a modern poet who is, who must be, priest of his own imaginative religion, rather as Keats imagines himself to be in the second half of 'Ode to Psyche.' What happens is more than a Romantic raid on the medieval Catholic Thomist epic; it is also a matter of independent responsiveness, as Shelley both appropriates and honours Dante, and seeks resurgent consolation and existential encouragement through the act and fact of poetic creativity. Shelley is often most original at the very points where we most detect Dante's influence. What might be thought as a still point round which the wheel of the elegy turns, namely stanza 21, is a case in point:

26. For a seminal essay on these lines and their importance for understanding Shelley's response to Dante, see Stuart Curran, 'Figuration in Shelley and Dante', in *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, Nick Havely (ed.), New York, St Martin's Press, 1998, pp. 49–59.

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,  
 But for our grief, as if it had not been,  
 And grief itself be mortal! Woe is me!  
 Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene  
 The actors or spectators? Great and mean  
 Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.  
 As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,  
 Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,  
 Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow. (181–189)

The writing bears witness to one of the lessons that Dante has taught Shelley: bareness. It is the point at which near-Baroque stylisation drops away, but the bareness is subtly organised, as the outcry 'Woe is me!' settles into the more resigned 'Month follow month with woe.'<sup>27</sup> Dante's tercets are replaced by Shelley's Spenserians, yet, without denying the presence of the English Renaissance poet in *Adonais*, it might be borne in mind that Shelley's chosen stanza allows him to highlight for individualised significance effects which in Dante are caught up more swiftly in and by the regularly self-parcelling out of the *terza rima*. The grieving and the sardonic co-exist, too, as in the unexpected introduction to the fact of suffering effected by the antepenultimate line. 'As long as skies are blue, and fields are green': as long as this, the reader might expect the poem to go on, 'all will be well.' But the line makes the unsettling point, already conveyed in the opening, that transience is the condition of what is best as well as worst about life. Above all, the stanza confronts ultimate questions: 'Whence are we? And what are we? Of what scene / The actors or spectators?'

The poem's challenge to itself is to find answers to those questions and to find a convincing mode and style in which to articulate those answers. It must first do so through a reversal of Dante's meeting with figures such as Brunetto Latini and Foresi Donati. As Erich Auerbach observes, Dante's Thomist view of the unity of soul and body, and of history and eternity, made it possible and 'necessary that the characters in Dante's other world, in their situation and attitude, should represent the sum of themselves; that they should disclose, in a single act, the

27. For discussion of the poem's 'Baroque' elements, see Bruce Haley, *Living Forms: Romanticism and the Monumental Figure*, Albany NY, State University of New York, 2003, pp. 215–216. See also Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience*, p. 176, which speaks of the opening's 'baroque verbal embellishment, quaintly suggestive of Giambattista Marino's *Adone*.'

character and the fate that had filled out their lives.'<sup>28</sup> Dante's encounters are confirmations of the reality of history, even as the 'other world' confers a sometimes terrible and terrifying permanence on character. The one character still undergoing change is Dante the pilgrim, always entering new and enlarged dimensions of understanding.<sup>29</sup> This understanding can be a question of grasping more firmly the mysteries of ethereal cosmology, and recognising that there is always more mystery that exceeds his grasp, as when Dante writes in the first canto of the *Paradiso*:

S'io fui del primo dubbio disvestito  
per le sorrise parolette brevi,  
dentro ad un novo più fui irretito [...] (94–96)

(Although divested of my first-rais'd doubt,  
By those brief words, accompanied with smiles,  
Yet in new doubt was I entangled more [...])

The tercet traces a movement forward that is also a circling back, and highlights 'new doubt' as a poetic motive and motor. But the poet-pilgrim's growth is also a matter of the heart as well as the head, and of moral apprehension, too. So, the encounter with Francesca da Rimini, which overwhelms the pilgrim with pity, is part of a complex process of education in the nature of love, which takes on its full meaning at the very end of the poem, when Dante acknowledges 'l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle' (translated imprecisely by Cary as the Love [...] / That moves the sun in heav'n and all the stars) (*Paradiso* 33. 145). There is a strong comparison here between this line's effect and the final line of *Adonais*, with its discovery of 'the abode where the Eternal are' (495).<sup>30</sup> Shelley's line gathers to itself the longing for ultimate meaning pervading his elegy and stands against its sometimes sorrowful, but often surprisingly rapt, engagement in 'becoming.'

Shelley, as he reflects on who he is or has been in the process of reflecting on what Keats was and now is, must meet, among others, himself in the riddling, strange self-portrait where, among the mourners,

28. Eric Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, intro Michael Dirda, 1<sup>st</sup> pub in German 1929, New York, New York Review of Books, 2007, p. 91.

29. Auerbach, *Dante*, writes: 'In the *Comedy* all the characters are interpreted, their individual destinies have been fulfilled; only Dante himself, the wanderer, in a state of uncertainty, still unfulfilled and subject to interpretation', p. 171.

30. I am indebted to Alan Weinberg for this suggestion.

there enters 'A pard-like Spirit beautiful and swift' (271). John Taaffe, friend of Shelley and author of *A Comment on the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (1822), compares the line to Dante's enigmatic depiction of 'una lonza leggiara e presta molto' (a panther nimble, light) (*Inferno* I. 32).<sup>31</sup> Cary, along with other commentators, glosses the panther as 'Pleasure, luxury.'<sup>32</sup> Yet, reappearing as an image of the Shelleyan self, the pleasure-seeking panther has discovered much about poetic pains. Presenting 'one frail Form, / A phantom among men' (271–272). Shelley meets a version of himself, a figure at once vulnerable and powerful, 'frail' yet holding a thysrus, 'a light spear topped with a cypress cone, / Round whose rude shaft dark ivy tresses grew' (291–292). Objectified, Shelley is like a Dantescan personage encountered by the poet and the poet encountering such a personage; it is as if, in the process of objectifying himself, he is able to move beyond his sense of himself as 'a Power / Girt round with weakness' (281–282), to confront and leave behind his feelings of potential limitation and failure, and to propel his poem's assault on the limits of definition.<sup>33</sup>

Shelley does so by turning on its head the meanings attaching to life and death as the poet magnificently relies on the sheer force of declarative utterance: 'he is not dead, he doth not sleep—/ He hath awakened from the dream of life' (343–344). If these lines might, given a sardonic twist, describe many of the characters whom Dante meets, figures who have awakened from the dream of life, Shelley has less interest in the particulars of post-mortal living. His is a poignantly tormented see-sawing between animosity towards 'the contagion of the world's slow stain' (356) and imagining of some other state or dimension. But this other state or dimension is less sequel to or fulfilment of this life than this life's shadowy, imaginatively compelling other.

As Fogle notes, what is 'hierarchical' in Dante is imaginatively 'dialectical' in Shelley.<sup>34</sup> Answers to questions are rhetorical, not

31. Richard Harter Fogle, 'John Taaffe's Annotated Copy of *Adonais*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 17, 1968, pp. 31–52 (p. 45).

32. *The Vision*, trans. Cary, vol. 1. p. 5n.

33. This account has much in common with Alan Weinberg's pertinent observations in a footnote: 'What is sometimes taken to be self-pity on the part of the poet is really a dramatic representation of the limitations and inadequacies of the aspiring poet, or indeed of poetry itself. The speaker engages in an implicit act of self-confrontation. One thinks of Dante-pilgrim whose imperfections, as poet and pilgrim, are mirrored throughout Purgatory', pp. 294–295n.

34. Fogle, 'Dante and Shelley's *Adonais*', p. 15.

theologically grounded; they are part of a poetic dynamic that is enthralled by Dantean flights and tropes but cannot be governed by the medieval poem's overall law of development. Affirmations obey their own Shelleyan impulsions, having about them a quality of prolonged chant, and indeed ebbing confidence or resulting qualification, as is seen in the remainder of the stanza in question (the whole is quoted for convenience):

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep –  
 He hath awakened from the dream of life –  
 'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep  
 With phantoms an unprofitable strife,  
 And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife  
 Invulnerable nothings. – *We* decay  
 Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief  
 Convulse us and consume us day by day,  
 And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay. (343–351).

The 'dream of life' idea is what takes over here, as Shelley focuses on the survivors, named as 'we', for whom 'life' turns out with devastating appositeness to rhyme with 'unprofitable strife.' The first lines send their reverberations through the stanza, and their radiant music never wholly fades, yet something darker and more dissonant emerges from that radiant music as the stanza finds its way to its desolate, mocking close: 'And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.'

The Spenserian stanza is programmed to achieve different effects from those more suited to *terza rima*. As suggested earlier, it can highlight moments that are starkly individual, as in the just-quoted stanza's opening challenge to conventional understanding of death and life; at the same time it can intimate prolonged reverberations and internal qualification, as in the reworking here of the 'charnel' image; see, by contrast and connection, the earlier beautiful but sinister reference to the 'vault of blue Italian day' (59) as Adonais's 'fitting charnel-roof' (60). That said, the Dantean offer of paradise is potent. In the medieval poet's depiction, Aristotelian whatness informs Platonic idea. Shelley's stance depends on a post-Dantean combination of these great complementary, warring thinkers in the Western tradition in which the lure of the ideal takes fully on board the claims of the material. In Stanza 52, for instance, Shelley brings his own dramatising involvement with shifting possibilities to the fore:

The One remains, the many change and pass;  
 Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
 Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
 Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
 Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,  
 If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!  
 Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,  
 Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
 The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak. (460–468)

The stanza might be difficult to assign with certainty to a Dantean original, yet it feels like one of those passages where Shelley has completely absorbed a Dantean mode of thinking, an absorption that coalesces with his own readiness to explore and allow for divagation and shifts. It begins with unadorned Platonic statement, 'The One remains, the many change and pass'; it passes into apparent illustration that, through the dynamism of the image, transforms our grasp of the opening statement, since the image leaves us caught between 'white radiance' and 'dome of many-coloured glass', and possibly flinching at the brutalism of 'Death tramples it to fragments.' Then, as in some speeded-up involvement of the pilgrim-poet's function in Dante, the emphasis becomes openly subjective, for all Shelley's use of an apparently other-directed imperative: 'Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek! / Follow where all is fled.' The 'thou' here is the self; the power of the poetry has to do with the poet's and the reader's impulse both to 'Follow' and to shrink from the virtually screamed-out imperative, 'Die.' At the stanza's end the poetry drives towards a glimpse of near-inexpressibility; yet the very Dantean word 'transfuse'—one might compare 'trasumanar' in the first canto of *Paradiso*—implies a moving between realms at odds with the absolute distinctions made earlier in Shelley's poem. Mediation between the mortal and the eternal may be possible, language not only strained beyond as 'weak' (467), but able, despite its limitations, to gesture 'with fitting truth' towards 'glory' (468).

Stanza 54 also exemplifies the way in which 'new relations are ever developed' through Shelley's response to Dante:

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,  
 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse

Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
 Which through the web of being blindly wove  
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of  
 The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me,  
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality. (478–486)

As one responds to this passage, one is conscious of the reaction in the poetry against some of the more pessimistic accounts of the human condition that have preceded it. The vision here is hostile, yes, to 'the last clouds of cold mortality', and is able to speak in near-Gnostic terms of 'the eclipsing curse / Of birth', and, moreover in 'the web of being blindly wove', it implies something close to the sense of hapless hap typical of Thomas Hardy.<sup>35</sup> Yet this negative view of life does not erase the splendour of affirmation in the reference to 'That Light whose smile kindles the Universe, / That Beauty in which all things work and move, / That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse / Of birth can quench not; that sustaining Love': Light, Beauty, Benediction and Love kindle and sustain the poetry, transfer our attention to the ideals they embody. Shelley encapsulates great swathes of beatific suggestion in the *Paradiso* in the noun 'smile'; Peter S. Hawkins even goes so far as to comment that 'the smile is not only Dante's signature gesture but perhaps his most original and indeed useful contribution to medieval theology—or indeed to the Christian tradition itself.'<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the repeated use of 'That', splendidly affirmative in one way, seems, in another, at least subliminally, a symptom of over-insistence, as though Shelley were demanding that he and we believe in the real existence of abstract ideals which much in experience seems to negate. 'That Light' turns to Dante for support, while recognising that such a turn is a reconfirmation that poetry is, as Shelley phrases it in *A Defence of Poetry*, 'vitally metaphorical' (p. 676): both life-giving and a question of fictions.

In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley praises Dante for the way in which 'as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause'; as embodied in the *Paradiso*, this feigning adds up, for Shelley, to 'the most glorious imagination of modern poetry' (p. 691). It is indeed, the 'feigning' idealism at work in a stanza such as 54 that

35. Weinberg sees the 'main body of the stanza' as qualifying its initial reference to 'Light' 'in terms of the very opening lines of *Paradiso* I', p. 199. My emphasis is more on the radically dark nature of Shelley's qualification.

36. Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2006, p. 129.



gives the lie to Bloom's persuasively if perversely eloquent account of the stanza: 'In this straining upward', writes Bloom, 'the natural world that is given to us becomes only a darkness.'<sup>37</sup> Dante has provided Shelley with a vocabulary for his deep wish to believe that there is, ultimately, a guarantor of goodness and harmony. Dante will call this guarantor God; Shelley, through his use of multiple terms, uses words that, in one mood, that of the sceptical voice heard in the first half of stanza 3 of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', he might regard as the records of humanity's 'vain endeavour' (25) to come up with answers to ultimate questions. But, in another mood, one that prevails, they seem like necessary fictions or imaginings that nourish hope.

Dante's presence in the stanza is pervasive and subtle. As the Longman editors of *Adonais* note (and before them Fogle and Taaffe), one analogue is provided by the opening lines of *Paradiso* 1:

La gloria di colui che tutto move  
per l' universo penetra, e risplende  
in una parte più, e meno altrove. (1-3)

(His glory, by whose might all things are mov'd,  
Pierces the universe, and in one part  
Sheds more resplendence, elsewhere less.)

Dante commented on these verses in the *Letter to Cangrande* (if he was the author of the letter), arguing, as Robert Hollander glosses the matter, 'that we are to find the glory of God's Being reflected in all that exists in His secondary creation':<sup>38</sup> a philosophically nuanced account. Shelley is more rhetorically extreme, at a stretch, not beginning an ascent towards a vision of God with a masterly exposition, but ending an unstable, virtually post-Christian elegy with a hoped-for clutching at imperishable ideals he remembers from Dante. Shelley retains a stronger sense of all that resists his absolute, even as he allows it to act on him in a way that recalls St Bernard's prayer to Mary on behalf of Dante in the final canto of the *Paradiso*: 'perchè tu ogni nube gli dislegghi / di sua mortalità' (that thou wouldst drive / Each cloud of his mortality away) (33. 31–32). Bernard asks this so that Dante might gaze on 'il sommo piacer' (the sovran pleasure, as Cary has it; the Hollanders prefer 'beauty' for 'piacer') (33).

37. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, rev. and enlarged edn. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971, p. 349

38. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, verse translation by Robert and Jean Hollander, intro and notes by Robert Hollander, New York, Doubleday, 2007, p. 13.

Noting this echo, Weinberg comments that 'Shelley puts the emphasis on "self" ("beams on me"), whereas Dante stresses vision.'<sup>39</sup> Shelley does not intercede; he claims and asserts. It is the woven, sustaining force of imaginative will and power that will ensure the consumption of cold mortality.

And yet, true to his own originality, Shelley then segues into the next and final stanza with a re-emergence of the fear and uncertainty which track the poetry's flight of fire in this final section. He has already alerted us to this fear when in the triply 'shrinking' formulation of line 469, 'Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?', he reprises Virgil's questions to Dante at the close of *Inferno* 2:<sup>40</sup>

Dunque che è? perchè, perchè ristai?  
perchè tanta viltà nel core allette?  
perchè ardire e franchezza non hai [...] (121–123)

(What is this comes o'er thee then?  
Why, why dost thus hang back? why in thy breast  
Harbour vile fear? Why has thou not courage there,  
And noble daring?)

Virgil's very manner, his advocacy of freedom enacted by the unusual enjambment at the end of the tercet, gives Dante new heart, as the subsequent simile of the fainting flowers renewing their life at dawn bears witness (127–129). Yet in Shelley's hands, in the context of what feels like deep personal sorrow, Dantean questioning sheds its exhortatory vigour to a degree, and we detect the poet's fear, a fear which persists in the remarkable final stanza:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
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. (487–495)

39. Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

As commentators have noted, Shelley begins with a glance at the opening of *Paradiso*, canto 2.<sup>41</sup> There, Dante suggests that 'voi, che siete in piccioletta barca, / desiderosi d'ascoltar' (ye, who in small bark have following sail'd, / Eager to listen) (1–2) should 'tornate a rivider li vostri liti' (Backward return with speed, and your own shores / Revisit' (4) lest they go astray. Dante asserts his originality: 'L'acqua ch' io prendo giammai non si corse' (The way I pass, / Ne'er yet was run—Cary's version does less than justice to 'L'acqua', rendered by the Hollanders as 'The seas') (7). Shelley affirms a state of inspiration. It is common to note the gap between Dante and Shelley. As Weinberg writes: Dante 'has a structured universe and the company of Beatrice to guide his way. Between the bard and the soul of *Adonais*, on the other hand, there is the emptiness of space.'<sup>42</sup> And certainly, in turning to Dante, Shelley marks the points at which he and his great predecessor diverge. But it is also the case that being borne 'darkly, fearfully' is what makes possible the poet's fictions of some final exalted glory.

The very gap between quester and goal affirms the possible existence of the latter. Shelley will, one imagines, have responded strongly to lines in *Paradiso*, canto 3, in which the pilgrim views spiritual beings as though they were shadows. A beautiful simile concerned with mirroring and reflections explains itself thus:

tali vid'io più facce a parlar pronte,  
perch'io dentro all'error contrario corsi  
a quell ch'accesse amor tra l'uomo el il fonte. (16–18)

(such saw I many a face,  
All stretched to speak, from whence I straight conceived  
Delusion opposite to that, which raised,  
Between the man and fountain, amorous flame.)

Cary glosses his word 'Delusion' as though Dante were saying: 'An error contrary to that of Narcissus; because he mistook a shadow for a substance, I, a substance for a shadow.'<sup>43</sup> Dante partly frees Shelley from his self-suspicion, dating back at least to the reflexive enigmas of *Alastor*, that he is mistaking 'a shadow for a substance', offering the Romantic poet an idiom to develop the optimism made possible by doubt and

41. For a full discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

43. *The Vision*, trans. Cary, vol. III, p. 22n.

uncertainty: the belief that one might, after all, be mistaking 'a substance for a shadow.' *Adonais*, as it turns to Dante, hopes that the metaphorical has a reality, that, though the poet is 'borne, darkly, fearfully, afar', he is moving far from a world that has lost meaning towards a dimension where, as in the *Paradiso*, he can meet soul-fulfilling realities.<sup>44</sup> That this imagined movement remains a burning hope, a shadow-ridden aspiration, reminds us of the burden placed on the shoulders of this Romantic answer to Dante's 'sacrato poema.' Shelley captures well the way in which Dante reappears in *Adonais* when he describes the workings of influence in these lines:

When lofty thought  
Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,  
And love and life contend in it, for what  
Shall be its earthly doom, the dead live there  
And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air. (392–396)

The 'dead' may be plural, but the word might be applied to Dante's verses and images, the way in which they 'live' in Shelley's poem, one that continually, as in the last stanza, moves between the 'dark and stormy' and 'light.' The phrase 'winds of light' has a Dantean resonance, recalling innumerable image-patterns throughout the *Paradiso* (compare canto 25, 79–81). Yet 'winds of light' have an auto-poetic quality. They do not speak of an approach to the Empyrean; rather, they suggest the currents of Dante-illuminated inspiration available to a poet exiled from the medieval poet's belief-system. Shelley's lines here themselves 'move like winds of light on dark and stormy air', with their striving rhymes that draw attention to the operations of poetic desire: the unparaphrasable 'what' towards which 'lofty thought' aims in a suggestive off-rhyme, the 'there' that is brought into view by the poetry's own 'dark and stormy air.' But the dead verses of Dante live again in *Adonais*, resurrected with a creative flair that ensures originality embeds itself in a spirited and independent honouring of previous poetic achievement.

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44. For insightful commentary on the 'rhetorical process' of *Adonais*, see Mark Sandy. *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 107.