‘Shelley Often Combines an Artful Mastery of Form with what seems to be a Cry of his Heart’ (Michael Ferber).

Discuss

Rupert Swallow — February 2018
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Shelley's poetry contains a complex interplay, or 'artful mastery', of form, in several of the many senses of the word. This interplay conveys both the strength of human emotion — the 'cry of his heart' — and its inexpressible nature through language — its ability only to 'seem'. Shelley uses form to express emotion directly and eloquently, if equivocally. His ability to do so rests on the recognisably Structuralist conception of poetry he espouses in *A Defence of Poetry* (henceforth *Defence*). Poetry is 'the expression of the Imagination'[1] which is defined as the mind acting upon subjects 'so as to colour them with its own light' (*Defence*, p.856).[2] Moreover, poetry's transformative power makes it a singularly apt tool for political protest, since its ability to defamiliarise its subject matter and so '[turn] all things to loveliness' (*Defence*, p.866) implicitly questions the reader's assumptions about societal *status quo*s. On the other hand, though O'Neill, for example, is right to remark that in many of Shelley's works, 'words mime a process of enquiry and frustration' which is 'not a question of Shelley forcing language to perform a dance of semantic self-erasure', there are times, as in his reconfiguration of pastoral elegy in *Adonais*, when such a deconstructive interpretation is both relevant and useful.[3] Such interpretations uncover the sense of something more deeply interfused, to use Wordsworth's phrase, something obscured by, and yet alluded to, in the formal conventions of elegy and in the poem's formal structures.[4]

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[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, A *Defence of Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume D, The Romantic Period*, 9th Edition, edited Julia Reidhead (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012), p.857. All quotations from Shelley's poetry are taken from this edition, with the line number quoted in the text.

[2] This conception of form has notable similarities with the earlier ideas of Kant, 'the founder of all formalism in aesthetics in modern philosophy', in *The Critique of Judgement*. For Kant, form working through mind, was 'that factor of knowledge which gives reality and objectivity to the thing known'. Shelley's political critique of poetry uses and refigures the ideas of eighteenth century philosophy. See also footnote 23. Douglas Burnham, 'Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Kant', Staffordshire University, http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/, 26th January 2018. See also usage 4.d. of "form, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/73421. Accessed 26 January 2018.

[3] 'Shelley's Pronouns: Lyrics, Hellas, Adonais, and *The Triumph of Life*', Michael O'Neill, *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe; with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.395.

[4] Rajan makes a similar point when she says that her book, *Dark Interpreter*, 'posits a subject [Shelley, or the poetic narrator] who uses discourses as part of a drama of concealment and disclosure'. Tilottama Rajan, 'Displacing Post-Structuralism: Romantic Studies after Paul de Man', *Shelley*, edited Michael O'Neill, p.241.

Perhaps rather appropriately for Shelley's poetry, given the wonderfully equivocal multiplicity of interpretations that deconstructive critics such as Miller and Hogle find in it, the word 'form' itself has many and varied meanings; the Oxford English Dictionary notes 21 distinct possibilities. I shall focus on three in this essay; form in the most obvious sense of versification, which Shelley sees, as a structuralist might, as constituting the relation of thoughts 'both between each other and towards that which they represent' (*Defence*, p.860); form as the 'observance of etiquette, ceremony, or decorum', which Shelley shows, by virtue of poetry's transformative power, to be a fitting vehicle for political critique;[5] form as genre, in particular, Shelley's use of the pastoral elegy to enact a process of remembrance and forgetting.

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The title statement references a conflict in the Romantic period between the sense which metrical form imposes on words and the sensibility which animates them into poetry. Shelley argues to this effect in *A Defence of Poetry*, the essentially structuralist conception of poetry of which imbues words with meaning and structure, and so establishes a mutual link between the two. If 'language is [...] produced by the Imagination' (*Defence* p.859), he writes, and the Imagination is 'mind acting upon thoughts so as to colour them with its own light' (*Defence* p.856), then it follows that language is a set of signs, of thoughts 'coloured' (*Ibid*). This is so whether language 'marks the before unapprehended relations of things' or in a less metaphorical and enervating sense refers to 'portions or classes of thoughts' (*Defence*, p.858), and also even if its referents may be modified 'through time' (*Ibid*). Moreover, Shelley marks an intrinsic relationship between the arrangement of sounds and thoughts, the 'uniform and harmonious recurrence' (*Defence*, p.860) of which 'is scarcely less

[5] Usage 15. of "form, n." *OED Online.*

indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to the peculiar order' (*Ibid*). This statement marks the centrality of form, in the first sense of structure or versification, in the communication of poetic meaning.

For example in 'The Cloud', the variable anapestic metre, alternating between tetrameter and trimeter, gives the poem a lyric quality which conveys the cloud's lackadaisical attitude towards human mortality, belonging as it does to the endlessly repeating cycles of the natural world:

> I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
> And out of the caverns of rain,
> Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
> I arise and unbuild it again. ('The Cloud', ll.81-4)

The internal rhyme of 'womb' with 'tomb' here hints at the necessary death attendant on birth and life, and yet the echoing syntax of the line equally suggests that the two are mutually codependent, part of the cloud's cyclic structure of renewal; 'I change but I cannot die' (l.76). The word 'arise' in the next line and fact that the cloud laughs as it 'unbuilds' (l.84) its own 'cenotaph' — its destruction is the cloud's rebirth — similarly show that the structures of human mortality are not applicable to the cloud. The rhyme of 'laugh' and 'cenotaph' similarly shows how the cloud is remaking itself both in poetry and in Nature. Moreover, the 'blue dome of air' (l.80) which forms this cenotaph incidentally recalls the 'waters which were above the firmament' in *Genesis* 1:7, emphasising creation in its most original sense.[6] The subtle versification expresses the cloud's heartfelt cry of joy and elation at its ever-renewing lifecycle.

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[6] There are also perhaps hints of a Christ-like rebirth in the echo of the cloud's 'caverns of rain' (l.82) of the empty tomb that Mary Magdalene finds in *John* 20:2-9.

Similarly, a poem's ability to defamiliarise its subject matter is crucial to making voluble its 'cry of the heart'. Shelley's ideas in this respect seem amazingly prescient in light of the later theoretical advances of Russian formalism. When Shelley writes that '[p]oetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects' such as traditional poetic forms 'be as if they were not familiar' (*Defence*, p.862) he seems almost to be advocating Shklovsky's idea of estrangement. Likewise, when Shklovsky writes that '[i]n the routines of everyday speech, our perceptions of, and responses to, reality become stale, blunted [...] By forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, literature refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more perceptible' he seems to echo, in reverse, Shelley's thought that 'if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse' (*Defence*, p.858).[7] Shklovsky's conclusion that literary works draw attention to their own formal profile not for purely aesthetic effect, but to intensify the perception of what they refer to, is thus perhaps relevant in interpreting Shelley's poetry.

In 'England in 1819', Shelley's subversion of form, in the second sense of decorum or 'behaviour according to prescribed or customary rules', shows how pressing the need for revolution is.[8] Shelley shatters readerly expectations with a wonderfully energetic use of labial stops on stressed beats — 'blind, despised, and dying' (l.1), 'the dregs of their dull race' (l.2), 'drop, blind in blood, without a blow' (l.6) — quite at odds with the often stately and dignified rhythms appropriate to the diction of the sonnet form. Likewise the change in subject from royalty to populace marks a volta after six lines, inverting the conventional

[7] Eagleton, quoted in a lecture entitled 'Formalism', Professor Alastair Renfrew, Durham University, 28th October 2016.
[8] Usage 15. of "form, n." *OED Online.*

order of octave followed by sestet. This perhaps hints that the current order of society is unnatural and implicitly urges that the order be reversed so that the people come first, both in the poetry and in society. The tightly rhymed sestet — alternating abababa — perhaps also suggests the stasis of the current system and the fact that, being 'mud from a muddy spring' (l.3), the 'dregs of [this] dull race' (l.2) cannot regenerate themselves. Moreover, the prolific use of trochaic feet throughout fractures the iambic pentameter and suggests that a new form, poetic and societal, is appropriate to 'burst' and 'illumine our tempestuous day' (l.14).

In 'England in 1819' the polemic tone and Shelley's modifications of the sonnet form force the reader to reexamine established forms; what Shelley performs with language in the poem, the reader is asked to perform on the institutional structures of control and oppression they have been inoculated to; the artful mastery of the sonnet form makes the reader aware of its cry of protest.

This is such because, for Shelley, '[t]he great instrument of moral good is the Imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause' (*Defence*, p.862). Subject matter and structure are codependent. Moreover the experience of pleasure intrinsically recalls 'the pain of the inferior' (*Defence*, p.863). 'The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself' (*Ibid*). This idea is present throughout Shelley's poetry, as well as in his prose; he writes, for example, in 'To a Skylark', 'Teach me half the gladness/ That thy brain must know' ('To a Skylark', ll.101-2). The other half of the lark's gladness is not required perhaps because it would be superfluous to the poet-narrator, or, as is urged by Shelley's critical view in *A Defence*, because poetic space

must be left for gladness's rhyming pair, sadness. Thus verse is the perfect medium for engaging critically in political debates for 'moral good' (*Defence*, p.862), since it combines an awareness of pain, in its subject matter, with the beautifying effect of its structure.

Shelley's belief in poetry's ability to beautify ugliness — 'Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted' (*Defence*, p.860) — also implies its suitability as a form of political protest and critique.[9] When Shelley criticises the various mechanisms of state oppression in an elegantly crafted and tightly controlled sonnet such as 'England in 1819', he conveys 'the wisdom which mingles in [poetry's] delight' (*Defence*, p.861). The grim literalness with which royal corruption is often figured in other works, for example as 'the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,/ Stewed in corruption' (3.4.93-4) in *Hamlet*, is in this poem transmuted into the natural image of 'mud from a muddy spring' (l.3).[10] A similar effect might be seen in how Shelley uses the form of the pastoral elegy in *Adonais*, discussed in more detail below, to recoup a sense of poetic consolation for Keats, now 'robed in dazzling immortality' (l.409) as the mythic Adonais. '[Poetry's] secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life' (*Defence*, p.866). In recognising the inevitability of mortality and decay, poetry is able to transmute the grief of death into a celebration of eternal life. Poetry defamiliarises its subject matter through an artful recombination and modification of form and formal conventions, and so serves as a vehicle for societal improvement on both personal and national levels. Ferber's statement

[9] The idea that poetry is a medium well-suited to expressing cries of the heart was also present in the minds of Shelley's contemporaries. Wordsworth for example wrote, in his 1800 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'There can be little doubt but that more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose.' Quoted in Michele Turner Sharp, 'Mirroring the Future *Adonais*, Elegy, and the Life in Letters', *Criticism*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Wayne State University Press, 2000), http://www.jstor.org/stable/23124278, accessed: 29th January 2018, p.307.

[10] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), p.43.

that 'Shelley often combines an artful mastery of form with what seems to be a cry of his heart' thus becomes almost a given since this combination is inherent in Shelley's conception of poetry itself.

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However, later critics such as Miller and Ulmer disrupt this structuralist unity between form and expression, instead seeing in Shelley's poetry 'a dance of semantic self-erasure',[11] an interminably repeating, and so unstable, determination of meaning.[12] Very much part of this post-structuralist movement, Tilottama Rajan argues that *A Defence* 'contains the seeds of a deconstructive theory of language'.[13] She brings out this sense of indeterminacy when she notes that *Adonais*, *Alastor*, and *Epipsychidion* 'communicate disjunctively, as products of a poetic consciousness that exists on two levels of awareness';[14] working on both idealistically and realistically these poems dramatise a gap in communication. Ferber's use of the word 'seems' in the title might thus be interpreted as a reference to the inability of language, and of Shelley's poetry in particular, to assert a transcendental signified and stabilise the textual play of floating signifiers.

[11] O'Neill, 'Shelley's Pronouns', p.395. In this case O'Neill is in fact arguing against, rather than for, such a deconstructive interpretation.

[12] Even critics predating the post-structuralist theoretical developments foreshadow the later obsession with indeterminacy. Hazlitt was critical of Shelley's ability to conjure poetry 'out of nothing'. '"His bending, flexible form," as he puts it, "appears to take no strong hold of things, does not grapple with the world about him, but slides from it like a river."' Likewise Frederick A. Pottle, defending Shelley from the rancour of Allen Tate, uses I. A. Richards' distinction between the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor to note that 'Shelley constantly flashes back and forth between tenor and vehicle'. He concludes that 'such practice is not carelessness but a brilliant extension of poetic possibilities'. Respectively: William Hazlitt, quoted in Michael O'Neill, 'Introduction', *Shelley*, p.2; Donoghue, D. (1985). 'Keach and Shelley'. [Review of the books *Shelley's Style* and *Ariel: A Shelley Romance*.] London Review of Books, 7(16), 12-13. Retrieved from https://www.lrb.co.uk/v07/n16/denis-donoghue/keach-and-shelley; Patrick Swinden, *Shelley: Shorter Poems and Lyrics*, A Casebook (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), p.32.

[13] Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.293.

[14] Tilottama Rajan, 'Idealism and Skepticism in Shelley's Poetry', *Shelley*, p.254.

A poem in which this deconstructive impulse might be seen is *Adonais*. In it, the *seeming* cry of the heart is created by an artful mastery of form, in its third sense. The use of the elegiac form enacts what J. Hillis Miller has described as a process of 'a remembering that is at the same time a forgetting.'[15] Elegy calls to mind the lost one, reimagining and so forgetting them, obscuring their reality behind illusory fictions; in *Adonais* Keats becomes, a blend of 'the vegetation deity, Adonis, and the Judaic Adonai'.[16]

Likewise, the elegiac form allows Shelley to '[hint] at personal sorrow, even as he veils it'.[17] This effect is particularly clear in the description of the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, where both Keats and Shelley's three-year-old son, William, were buried. According to convention, the elegiac form expresses its declaration of grief publically. Stanza 49 begins, appropriately enough, as though addressing an audience: 'Go thou to Rome' (l.433). The very personal note of grief in the final three lines is thus exhibited for all to see, while artfully veiled by the removes and deferrals of pastoral imagery:

> … a slope of green access
> Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead,
> A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread. (ll.439-41)

Shelley's own grief is only hinted at in the glancing allusion of a simile and is immediately covered over by the layers, literal and metaphorical, of light and flowers and grass. Moreover, the '*light* of laughing flowers' (my emphasis) picks up a trope throughout Shelley's poetry, one which Miller draws attention to in his essay on *The Triumph of Life*, '(a poem full of echoes of *Adonais*)'.[18] 'Light for Shelley is the condition of human seeing and

[15] J. Hillis Miller, 'Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life'', *Shelley*, pp.237-8.
[16] Sacks in fact goes one step further and argues that 'Shelley's act of renaming neatly suggests this intention to use and yet alter the inherited elegiac tradition: to use its essential strategy of assimilating the deceased to a figure of immortality, while redefining the meaning of that figure.' Peter Sacks, 'Last Clouds: A Reading of Adonais', *Studies in Romanticism*, 23 (Fall 1984), pp.380-400. Quoted in *Shelley*, p.178.
[17] O'Neill, 'Shelley's Pronouns', p.397.
[18] O'Neill, 'Adonais and Poetic Power', p.50.

naming, which means it is the principle of substitution and forgetting. Each thing is seen as another thing and so forgotten.'[19] There is a similar moment when stanza 44 describes the obscuring veils covering over the endless brightness of the stars which '[t]he splendours of the firmament of time' (l.388) are like; they 'move like winds of light on dark and stormy air' (l.396), perhaps combining this 'chain pattern' of light with the breath of poetic inspiration.[20] William's smile is thus established only in palimpsest; in keeping both with the elegiac form and the theories of deconstruction, it is a trace remembered only to be forgotten.

Miller in fact sees the formal arrangement of a poem's versification as key to its constant deferral of meaning down the chain of signification: 'It is not so much signs as such that have this stunning power' of making things intelligible while depriving them of intelligibility 'as the rhythmic patterning of these signs, the repeatable metrical or syntactical paradigms into which they are ordered and which is the condition of their beauty and of their intelligibility.'[21] For example in *The Mask of Anarchy*, '[a] mist, a light, an image [...] Like the vapour of a vale' (ll.103-5) heralds the appearance of Anarchy. The triple overlay of mist, light, and nebulous 'image', together with the punning reference to a veil, similarly suggests the removes to which linguistic communication is subject.

In *Adonais* this uncertainty makes determining the nature of the consolation Shelley affirms for Keats very complex. The final stanza of the poem, as Epstein has noted, is markedly hesitant.[22] The beacon in the final line, while often seen as a guiding image,

[19] Miller, p.219.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Miller, p.232.
[22] Andrew Epstein, '"Flowers That Mock the Corse beneath": Shelley's *Adonais*, Keats, and Poetic Influence', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 48, pp. 90-128 (Keats-Shelley Association of America, Inc., 1999) http://www.jstor.org/stable/30213023, accessed: 26th January 2018, p.125.

equally serves as a warning device.[23] Moreover, Sacks notes that 'the word *beacons*, derived as it is from the old English term for a sign (*beacen*), reinforces our recognition that even while the "soul of Adonais" and its star appear to burn through the veils of nature or of signification, they nevertheless function precisely as signs' (emphasis original).[24] The rhyme of 'afar' with Keats's 'star' likewise serves as an example of 'the endless deferral of contact with a "pure voice of creative 'Power' beyond the deceptive fictions of language"'[25] which Angela Leighton sees in *Adonais*.[26] The 'breath' (l.487) refers equivocally to Keats's dying breath which is Shelley's literal inspiration, and perhaps to the 'breath of Autumn's being' ('Ode to the West Wind', l.1), linked to the change and renewal of the seasons. The second movement of the poem however, as Wasserman has shown, separates Adonais from the natural world.[27] One cannot therefore firmly link seasonal renewal with poetic consolation. Likewise, in *Adonais*'s final image, Keats is only *like* a star. His consolation comes in his transformation into quite literally a *figure* of speech, a figure 'robed in [the] dazzling immortality' (l.409) of poetry. Shelley's heartfelt cry of anguish, if it exists, is not stated simply but, due to the poem's formal arrangement, is always deferred by the removes of figurative language and elegiac convention.[28]

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[23] See Epstein, p.125.
[24] Sacks, p.197.
[25] Michael O'Neill, '*Adonais* and Poetic Power', *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring, 2004), http://www.jstor.org/stable/24044965, accessed: 26th January 2018, p.51.
[26] Sacks also notes how Shelley's imagery of the star, which already asserts a distance, is further destabilised: 'An unexpected connection between images of light and those of textured veils and clouds which the light seems to oppose. [...] To make war on poetic language as an interpositional texture associated with a scarf, a veil, a pageantry of mist, a sheath, a dome of many-coloured glass, a web of being — all of which are to be trampled or torn — is to assault the very means by which the counter-image of a radiant star can be posited.' Sacks, p.194.
[27] Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp.462-502.
[28] See J. A. W. Heffernan, 'Adonais: Shelley's Consumption of Keats' *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, edited Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p.173.

However, Shelley's poetry cannot be defined solely by interpretations focusing on its self-referential, endlessly-deferring linguistic structures. As Stuart Curran has rather wryly noted, 'the abyss does tend to yawn'.[29] In this respect Michael O'Neill's conclusion on *Epipsychidion* is, I think, relevant to Shelley's oeuvre as a whole: 'thoroughgoing as Shelley's assault on the referential is, we are rarely tempted to dismiss *Epipsychidion* as merely verbal.' [30] Despite the, admittedly productive, complications of deconstructive interpretations, one feels the emotional force of Shelley's affirmations. Elsewhere O'Neill also writes perceptively that '[c]ertainly the Shelley [...] who in *A Defence of Poetry* both celebrates and betrays doubt about language's adequacy to thought [...] has something in common with the deconstructive enterprise. But Shelley still clings to logocentric assumptions'.[31] These assumptions are central to poetry's ability to affect both personal and political change. The consolation that Shelley creates for Keats in *Adonais* may be dismissed simply as the false affirmations of a poet's metaphors and yet there is also the sense that these metaphors are the suitable form for expressing his grief. Deconstructive interpretations may easily neglect the cry of Shelley's heart, the anguish and need to forget which lie beneath the surface of the magnificent, obfuscatory imagery. The structuralist argument contained in *A Defence*, the sense that it is in the form of expression that meaning is created, therefore remains relevant to, and expressed in, Shelley's own poetry. In this sense, Shelley combines an artful mastery of form, in many of its various senses, with eloquent and persuasive displays of emotion.

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[29] Stuart Curran, 'Shelley', *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism*, edited Frank Jordan, 4th edition, (New York: Modern Language Association of America, ,1985), p.658.
[30] Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.159.
[31] O'Neill, 'Introduction', *Shelley*, p.10.

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