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‘Dim Mirrors of Ruin’:

The Myth, Memory, and Mourning of P. B. Shelley’s Death



‘*Nothing of him doth fade / But doth suffer a sea change / Into something rich and strange’*

*(Epitaph,* Shelley’s Tomb*)*

1. He is to them [his friends] as a bright vision, whose radiant track, left behind in the memory, is worth all the realities that society can afford. Before the critics contradict me, let them appeal to any one who had ever known him: to see him was to love him; and his presence, like Ithuriel’s spear, was alone sufficient to disclose the falsehood of the tale, which his enemies whispered in the ear of the ignorant world.

His life was spent in the contemplation of nature, in arduous study, or in acts of kindness and affection. He was an elegant scholar and a profound metaphysician: without possessing much scientific knowledge, he was unrivalled in the justness and extent of his observations on natural objects; he knew every plant by its name, and was familiar with the history and habits of every production of the earth; he could interpret without a fault each appearance in the sky, and the varied phœnomena of heaven and earth filled him with deep emotion. He made his study and reading-room of the shadowed copse, the stream, the lake and the waterfall. Ill health and continual pain preyed upon his powers, and the solitude in which he lived…

(Mary Shelley, Preface, *Posthumous Poems,* (1824), p. v)

1. The savage criticism on… *Endymion*, which appeared in *The* and the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in his lungs.’

Keats was ‘composed of more penetrable stuff’

(Shelley, Preface, *Adonais* p. 411)

1. He is a presence to be felt and known

In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,

Spreading itself where’er the Power may move

Which has withdrawn his being into its own;

Which wields the world with never wearied love,

Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it from above.

(Shelley, Adonais, 373-378)

1. A pardlike Spirit beautiful and swift –

A Love in Desolation masked – A Power

Girt round with weakness – it can scarce uplift

The weight of the superincumbent hour;

It is a dying a lamp, a falling shower,

A breaking billow; -- even whilst we speak

Is it not broken? …. (Shelley, Adonais,280-86)

1. He, as I guess, had gazed on Nature’s naked loveliness,

Actaeon-like, and now had fled astray

With feeble steps o’er the world’s wilderness,

And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,

Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey. (Shelley. Adonais, 271–9)

1. Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains,

And feeds her grief with his remembered lay,

And will no more reply to winds or fountains,

Or amorous birds perched on the young green spray

Or herdsman’s horn, or bell at closing day;

Since she can mimic not his lips, more dear

Than those for whose disdain she pined away

Into a shadow of all sounds: − a drear

Murmur, between their songs, is all the woodmen hear.

(Shelley, Adonais, stanza 15)

1. i) Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down

Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were,

Or they dead leaves; since her delight is flown,

For whom should she have waked the sullen year?

To Phoebus was not Hyacinth so dear

Nor to himself Narcissus, as to both

Thou, Adonais: wan they stand and sere

Amid the faint companions of their youth,

With dew all turned to tears; odour to sighing Ruth. (Shelley, *Adonais,* stanza 16)

ii) ‘The bloom, whose petal s nipped before they blew / Died on the promise of the fruit, is

waste; / the lily lies –the storm is overpast (Shelley, Adoanis, 52-54)

8. 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 were 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. (Shelley, *Adonais*,stanza 55)

9. New figures on its false and fragile glass

‘As the old faded.’ - ‘Figures ever new

Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;

We have but thrown, as those before us threw... (Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, 247-50)

10. So came a chariot on the silent storm

Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape

So sate within as one whom years deform

Beneath a dusky hood and double cape

Crouching within the shadow of a tomb,

And o’er what seemed the head a cloud like crape

Was bent, a dun and faint ætherial gloom

Tempering the light… (Shelley, *The Triumph of* Life, 86-93)

11. ‘And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune

To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot

The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

‘All that was seemed as if it had been not –

As if the gazer’s mind was strewn beneath

Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

‘Trampled its fires into the dust of death… (Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, 382-88)