

“Transformation in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais*”

As has long been recognised, Shelley’s poem on the death of Keats, *Adonais*, concerns transformation: the move from life to death to life and vice versa, the changing seasons and states of nature, the cycle of existence, and the possibility of afterlife and ongoing artistic legacy. The poem’s focus on change and continuity can be read within the context of contemporary scientific and modern philosophical ideas of the transformation of matter: both put forward new ways of reading the material world as dynamic, vibrant and intra-active. Natural philosophers and natural historians in the Romantic period newly considered the ways in which individual bodies changed while the totality of matter in the world continued the same. In this essay, I liken the idea that matter is continually transforming within an overall stable system to the form and content of Shelley’s *Adonais*. The poem’s form demonstrates a commitment to the idea of “assimilation” in its use of classical and contemporary texts, myths and influences. I also compare the structure and movement of the poem to contemporary accounts of the material world, as the poem moves from the notion of individual death as irreversible loss to that of transformation as a positive force. For Shelley, change can be effected by new combinations and recombinations, composition and decomposition. Transformation can be both a destructive force and a mechanism for new creation. Processes of consumption and digestion, decay and evaporation, eventually lead Shelley in *Adonais* to move beyond a sense of personal loss to a new confidence in a continued existence through art and nature.

Shelley’s knowledge of science is now well documented and can be illustrated in the case of *Adonais*, by his interest in the chemist Humphry Davy.¹ Shelley’s poem was composed a year after the poet had written lengthy pages of notes, sometime around 8-13

¹ The first full-length book on Shelley and science was Carl Grabo, *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley’s Use of Science in Prometheus Unbound* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930).

April 1820, on Davy's *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*.² Davy recognised that the world was in a constant state of mutability:

by the influence of heat, light, and electrical powers, there is a constant series of changes; matter assume new forms, the destruction of one order of beings tends to the conservation of another, solution and consolidation, decay and renovation, are connected, and whilst the part of the system continue in a state of fluctuation and change, the order and harmony of the whole remain unchangeable (9).³

While matter is continually transforming into new forms, there is a stability for the whole.

For Shelley there are political possibilities for the scientific idea of mutability: negative things can be undone; what has been lost can be found; the world can divest itself of negative influences and assimilate positive ones. For both Davy and Shelley these ideas impacted on their sense of self: if our bodies are regularly renewed, as was speculated, how did this affect our sense of ourselves? In *Adonais*, Shelley applied the scientific idea to the question of artistic legacy: when the person dies, how will their fame be assured? What survives of us when the body changes in its final dissolution? In this essay, I first explore some of the different ways in which the concept of transformation featured in the popular science of the period, before considering how the philosophical ideas of new materialism seem to work with these and Shelley's ideas of matter. Then, I examine *Adonais* closely, looking at its shifts and turns as the body of the deceased the poet figure's views change.

² Carlene Adamson dates the notes in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas Notebook: A Facsimile of Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 6*, edited by Carlene A. Adamson. Vol. 5. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997, xlvi. Humphry Davy, *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*, 2nd ed. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1814, p. 29. Kelvin Everest writes "detailed work on the composition of *Adonais* will have begun by the middle of May" 1821, Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, ed. Kelvin Everest, in *The Longman Poetry of Shelley*, vol. 4, edited by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 2013), 241. All future reference to the poem are from this edition and given in the text of my essay.

³ Davy was particularly interested in the transformations that living and inorganic beings went through and the crowdsourced transcription of his notebooks offers further evidence of this: <https://digitalcollections-staging.lancaster.ac.uk/collections/davy/1>. See, for example Sharon Ruston, "Protean Forms in Humphry Davy's Notebooks", *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsnr.2023.0090>

Romantic Chemistry and New Materialism

Other chemists besides Davy routinely used the language of transformation to describe the alteration of states of matter in the Romantic era. The previous century had witnessed proof that matter could change state without changing its chemical properties.⁴ When heated, solids turned into liquids and, with further heat, into gases. In Britain, in 1800, Anthony Carlisle and William Nicholson, both good friends of William Godwin, used electricity to decompose water, leading the way for Humphry Davy to use the same method to isolate potassium and sodium, and other elements. What had once been thought of as an element might be decomposed by such means but the result of such experiments was simply a reorganisation of the same matter into differently conceived wholes. The popular science writer and instrument maker George Adams in his *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy* described how water was “transformed into a vapour” by boiling.⁵ In a section on the “metamorphosis of solids into liquids”, Adams described “*making the ice change it’s [sic] states, by converting it into water*” as a “transformation” (1: 269). In his book, Adams thus explains bodily processes such as evaporation, condensation, respiration, and combustion using chemical terms. Through such means, the material world is being continually transformed.

The French chemist, Jean-Antoine Chaptal, Comte de Chanteloup, uses the same kind of language in his major scientific treatise, *Elements of Chemistry*, which was translated into English by William Nicholson in 1800.⁶ Chaptal claims that denying matter’s ability to transform was the reason why the alchemists failed in their pursuit of immortality. In his “Preliminary Discourse”, Chaptal argued that transformation only went in one direction and could not be reversed: “the man of knowledge can never be led to think that chemistry can

⁴ See Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 212.

⁵ George Adams, *Lectures on natural and experimental philosophy [...]*, 5 vols. (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1794), 1:136.

⁶ M.I.A. Chaptal, *Elements of Chemistry*, trans. by William Nicholson. 3 vols. (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1791).

succeed in reversing that general law of nature which condemns all living beings to renovation, and a continual circulation of decompositions and successive generations.” (1: xvii) In other words, we will never be able to fix our state, or arrest it in the process of transformation. All living beings are, in his words, “condemned” to an eternal circulation of composition and decomposition (1: xvii). These processes are inevitable and there is no escape from them, though there remains the possibility that chemists might engineer or influence them.

Such ideas accorded with ancient philosophies and mythologies. Chaptal’s interpretation seems to prove that chemists had found scientific evidence of the *concordia discors*. For him, the very atmosphere was a “mass of homogeneous fluid”, or a “true chaos”:

We may consider this mass of fluid in which we live as a vast laboratory, in which the meteors are prepared, in which all the seeds of life and of death are developed, from which nature takes the elements of the composition of bodies, and to which their subsequent decomposition returns the same principles which were before extracted.”

(1; lxiii)

The world is imagined as a finite source of matter, from which “all the seeds of life and death are developed”. Nature is the presiding force here, using identical matter in the composition and subsequent decomposition of bodies. The metaphor of the “vast laboratory” for the world in which we live is illuminating because it identifies the power and agency of the chemist in controlling these processes. Similarly, Davy would write about soil as “the laboratory” in which food is prepared, paying particular attention to the importance of manure in this process, and Shelley would note from Davy that manure can be “converted” into other kinds of matter, including organized bodies.⁷

⁷ For Shelley’s notes on Davy’s *Lectures*, see Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality* (Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2005), 95-101 (98-99).

Chaptal thought chemists superior not only because they know about these actions but also because they can in some instances intervene in them, control them and cause them to occur:

Man alone possesses the rare advantage of knowing a part of these laws, of preparing events, of predicting results, of producing effects at pleasure, of removing whatever is noxious, of appropriating whatever is beneficial, of composing substances which nature herself never forms; and, in this last point of view, himself a Creator, he appears to partake with the Supreme Being in the most eminent of his prerogatives.

(1: lxvii)

These are words we might expect to hear from Victor Frankenstein. Content, and indeed keen, to play God, Chaptal makes the world the chemists' laboratory. Man is able not just to predict but to produce change, to use what is natural to create beings that even nature would not be able to form.

Davy likewise thought of chemistry as "creative", and that chemists were able to compete with the creativity of poetry and other arts. In his words, the chemist is a conqueror: one who sets out to change not merely describe the world.⁸ In a passage from his 1802 *Discourse*, whose echoes have been found in Shelley's Frankenstein's words, Davy argues that the chemist has

powers which may almost be called creative; which have enabled him to modify and change the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments.⁹

⁸ Anne K. Mellor first acknowledged this distinction in the interventionist science of Davy compared with the observational work of Erasmus Darwin in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London: Methuen, 1988), chap. 5.

⁹ Humphry Davy *Collected Works*, ed. by John Davy, 9 vols. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1839, 2:319. See Laura Crouch, "Davy's *A Discourse, Introductory to A Course of Lectures on Chemistry*: A Possible Scientific Source of *Frankenstein*", *Keats-Shelley Journal* 27 (1978): 35-44.

Davy's language of mastery and control comes from the earlier philosopher Francis Bacon's work *Novum Organum* (1620) where scientific knowledge is compared to power and dominion over nature and nature is figure as female to be forcibly overcome and subdued. Similarly in Davy's 1802 "Discourse", the chemist is not a passive observer but a conqueror. Ultimately, though, the body of the chemist himself is also subject to these processes, and as with all living beings, will decompose and rejoin the material world upon his demise.

Transformation did not only happen between different bodies or states; it also occurred within the same body. The processes of gestation, digestion, respiration, and ageing were thought of in these terms. The Scottish printer and encyclopaedist William Smellie saw forms "perpetually changing" in both the animal and mineral kingdoms and drew analogies between them.¹⁰ In his popular *Philosophy of Natural History*, which Mary Wollstonecraft reviewed for the *Annual Review*, he wrote:

Transformations are not peculiar to animals. All *organized bodies* pass through successive changes. Plants, of course, are not exempted from mutation. What amazing difference between an acorn and a stately oak? The seeds of plants may be compared to the chrysalids of butterflies. (Smellie, 2:67).¹¹

He was keen to point out though that despite these changes, there was also uniformity: "Though forms continually change, the quantity of matter is invariable." (2:71) The amount of matter remains the same even though the shapes it passes through continually change. Smellie believed that the same substance was used to create all animated beings, and would pass through successive transformations, by means of assimilation and evacuation, from the highest to the lowest in the scale of being, transgressing any boundary of species or kingdom.

¹⁰ William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Chamberlain and Rice *et al*, 1790), 2:71.

¹¹ Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler assigned this review to Wollstonecraft; see *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. 7 vols. London: William Pickering, 1989, vol. 7.

This view offers a potential levelling of hierarchy: the same matter that once created a living animal might find its way into a human body.

What might eventually become a man, for Smellie, could previously have cycled through past existences in other very different forms:

The same substances pass successively into the three kingdoms, and constitute, in their turn, a mineral, a plant, an insect, a reptile, a fish, a bird, a quadruped, a man. In these transformations, organized bodies are the principal agents. They change or decompose every substance that either enters into them, or is exposed to the action of their powers. Some they assimilate, by the process of nutrition, into their own substance; others they evacuate in different forms; and these evacuations make ingredients in the compositions of other bodies, as those of insects, whose multiplication is prodigious, and affords a very great quantity of organized matter for the nourishment and support of almost every animated being. Thus, from the apparently vilest and most contemptible species of matter, the richest productions derive their origin. (2: 71–2)

In Smellie's account, the body itself is the chemist. The body is continually working to bring external matter into itself and eject that which is no longer requires. Such ideas resonate with Romantic-period views of the connection between humans and the natural world. In Smellie's view, nothing is wasted, matter is finite, but it is continually circulating through its own process of assimilation and evacuation while also contributing to a larger cycle of composition, decomposition, and recombination in new form.

Smellie's view of the way that beings pass into earth and the air is both ancient, as best represented in Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and modern, predicting the way we now understand carbon atoms to exist:

It is a law of Nature, that all organized bodies should be decomposed, and gradually transformed into earth. While undergoing this species of dissolution, their more volatile particles pass into the air, and are diffused through the atmosphere. Thus animals, at least portions of them, are buried in the air, as well as in the earth, or in water. These floating particles soon enter into the composition of organized beings, who are themselves destined to undergo the same revolutions. (2:72).¹²

These kinds of discussions naturally led to questions of selfhood: just as Smellie writes that portions of animals are to be found in other elements, they also become part of other “organised beings” and vice versa. The Welsh physician and husband of the novelist Sydney Owenson, Sir Thomas Charles Morgan, wrote that it was “a very common opinion” to believe that every forty days, there is a “complete revolution of the whole man”.¹³ The physiologist William Lawrence argued the same: “the body cannot be called the same in any two successive instants”.¹⁴ As Michael Falk has written recently: “In the Romantic period, [the] problem of self-identity moved to the centre of literary consciousness.”¹⁵ Thomas Lovell Beddoes imagined in *Death’s Jest-Book*, for example, that the living “cannot, half a day, exist / Without repairing their flesh mechanism?” He questions whether life is, instead, the bits of spirit that “fly off” from the “little particles of flesh that die?” as Smellie also suggested.¹⁶

¹² On Shelley and Lucretius, see Amanda Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Lucretius monism is also important for the new materialists, such as Jean Bennett; see *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), x-xi. For the modern view of carbon, see Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (London: Penguin, 2000), chap. “Carbon”.

¹³ Thomas Charles Morgan, *Sketches of the Philosophy of Life* (London: Henry Colburn, 1818), 50.

¹⁴ William Lawrence, *An Introduction to Comparative Anatomy and Physiology* (London: J. Callow, 1816), 139.

¹⁵ Michael Falk is here, and in his book more generally, referring more to the philosophical than scientific questioning of self-identity, *Romanticism and the Contingent Self: The Challenge of Representation* (London: Palgrave, 2024), 2. He finds that for the Romantic writers he examines such as Charlotte Smith, John Clare and Thomas Moore’s Lord Byron, “We cannot collect ourselves into a whole. Nature does not form us into individuals. Experience is disparate. Subjectivity is a paradox. Self-discovery is impossible, because we have no self to discover.” (5)

¹⁶ My thanks to Ute Berns for alerting me to this passage in *Death’s Jest Book*, 5.4. 207-208, 210, 212. See her book *Science, Politics and Friendship in the Work of Thomas Lovell Beddoes* (Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2012), 291. In the chapter previous to this quotation, Berns relatedly reads the voice of Beddoes’s ‘squats

More recently, Sue Black has written about how what we now know about cell regeneration might cause us to think of selfhood in the manner of the Theseus paradox: ancient philosophers asked whether, if all the parts of Theseus' ship had worn out and been replaced over time, was it even the same ship?¹⁷ This is not simply a question of the renewal of the body, but also of selfhood: the form and content of Shelley's *Adonais* imagines an embodied sense of David Hume's notion that a self is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement".¹⁸ In *A Refutation of Deism*, Shelley writes that "no organized being can exist without a constant separation of that substance which is incessantly exhausted, nor can this separation take place otherwise than by the invariable laws which result from the relations of matter".¹⁹ *Adonais* offers another example of how Shelley imagines ascribes a continuing power of identity to poetry: through mutability and change there remains the possibility of a continuing identity and even immortality.

The changes described by Smellie and others are not always considered to be a true transformation of being. Contrary political views can be seen in Sir Richard Joseph Sullivan's *A View of Nature*, written when travelling in the Alps and with the express intention of reflecting upon the *Atheistical Philosophy, now Exemplified in France*. His anti-Jacobin affiliation becomes apparent when he discusses the way that "Bodies may be very much changed in their form and outward appearance, while their *component elements* suffer no

on a Toad-Stool", not as an example of metempsychosis (as other critics have) but as especially indebted to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's notion of the *nisus formativus* as 'scientifically re-conceived, if not transformed into something new and different, that is, "life".' (p. 240).

¹⁷ Sue Black, *All that Remains: A Life in Death* (London: Transworld, 2018), chap. 3. In the case of cells, Black tells us that there are cells which continue within us for life and even outlive us, in the manner Smellie suggested. For a contrary perspective, Bennett posits instead that cells only become fixed when they are examined in a laboratory setting; in the living body and beyond it, "'materiality' is a flow, an indivisible continuum of becomings whose protean elements are not only exquisitely imbricated in a flowing environment but also *are* that very flow." (92).

¹⁸ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 3 vols. (London: John Noon, 1739–40), 1:439. Others have written on the Romantic period's literature and the concept of the self; see for example Andrea Henderson, *Romantic Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ *Shelley's Prose*, p. 133. I go into lots more depth and give more examples in *Shelley and Vitality*.

change.”²⁰ When describing how lead can change states from powder to lead with the application of heat: “Matter is capable of many seeming *transformations*, but no real *transmutations* have ever been discovered” (1: 112). Conservative thinkers latched onto the idea that while there were instances of change, there was also, and more generally, stasis: change was only effected within what we would now call a closed system where matter always existed and could not be created or destroyed. Sullivan believed that while plants and animals return to the earth after death and dissolution, this is only a “return to the same sort of vegetable earth out of which they arose” rather than a genuinely new existence (1: 113). For those who supported the ideals of the French Revolution, transformation is possible, and it can arise from the materials of previous orders, but for those against it, all that is possible is an appearance of change or a return to a lower order of being. Writing about Shelley’s fascination with, and investment in the modern steamship, John Gardner, likens the endeavours of poetry and mechanism: “The notion of writing being a machine that could produce a physical effect, converting power into motion, moving people to action, was current in the Romantic period both literally and figuratively.”²¹ Shelley believed that real political change was possible and that it could be effected: the untimely death of Keats challenged these views but ultimately confirmed them.

More recently, new materialism has offered a way out of the limiting binaries that have reduced thinking and criticism over these past decades, even offering a way beyond the usual dichotomies of vitalism and materialism or mechanism posited by Romantic-era scholars.²² Focusing on the interconnectedness and cyclical nature of matter enables us to see

²⁰ Richard Joseph Sullivan, *A View of Nature, in Letters to a Traveller Among the Alps, with Reflections on Atheistical Philosophy now Exemplified in France*, 6 vols. (London: T. Becket, 1974) 1: 112.

²¹ John Gardner, ‘shelley’s Steamship’, *Keats Shelley Journal* 71 (2022), 87–113 (93). He also writes: “In Shelley’s way of thinking, reading a poem promotes action. Literature is a force working over distance and time that can move a reader kinetically.” (96)

²² Bennett, in a chapter entitled “Neither Vitalism nor Mechanism” writes that she is “looking for a materialism in which matter is figured as a vitality at work both inside and outside of selves, and is a force to be reckoned without being purposive in any strong sense.” (*Vibrant Matter*, p. 62) In *Shelley’s Broken World: Fractured Materiality and Intermitted Song*, Bysshe Inigo Coffey warns against deciding that Shelley was consistently a

beyond self and other, human and non-human, nature and culture, and other limiting stereotypes of essentialist characteristics.²³ It is generally agreed that Shelley thinks of matter as dynamic rather than inert.²⁴ As Kate Singer writes, the ‘syncretic thinker’ Shelley “was undoubtedly influenced by his combined readings of Lucretian particulate materiality, Spinozan responsive activity, and Hartleyan vibration, among other accounts of materialism and affect.”²⁵ Bennett traces a history of vibrant matter back to Spinoza (viii, x-xi). Rosi Braidotti has argued that “all human and nonhuman entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter”.²⁶ While Braidotti emphasises the ability of matter to determine itself, and this is rarely the case in Davy’s worldview, there is a shared sense of a world in perpetual motion, wholly alive, with human and non-human elements becoming each other as is found in the Romantic-era examples from men of science and natural historians above.

Jane Bennett describes matter “as an active principle, and a universe of lively materiality that is always in various states of congealment and diffusion” (*Vibrant Matter*, 93). Karen Barad writes that “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming* — *not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency*.

materialist throughout his life and career, arguing that Shelley “did not intend to resolve the divide between the material and immaterial world of the soul in his poetry [...]. Rather, he sought to actuate and enact the dynamic between sensuous reality and the gaps and pauses that punctuate it” (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 12. A different but very interesting tact is taken by Ross Wilson who discusses what he calls the “*post-organic animism*” evinced in Shelley’s poetry, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 6.

²³ See, for example, Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, “The Transversality of New Materialism”: “In contrast with the dualist traditions, which are reductive in nature and representationalist stifling exercises, the new materialism of both [Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti] focuses on the dynamic and the virtual, that is, on generativity that is not casually linear.” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 21, no. 2 (2010), 153–71 (158)

²⁴ See, most recently, Mary Fairclough use of Karen Barad in “Action at a Distance: Communication and Material Entanglement in *Queen Mab* and *The Mask of Anarchy*”, *Percy Shelley for Our Times*, edited by Omar F. Miranda and Kate Singer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 239–59.

²⁵ Kate Singer, *Romantic Vacancy: The Poetics of Gender, Affect, and Radical Speculation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2019), 66. The young Davy wrote a poem, which was first titled “The Life of a Spinosist”, HD MS RI 15/C, 7–10.

²⁶ Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 36, no. 6 (2018): 119–34 (128). <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327641877148>.

Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity".²⁷ There are connections to be made with Davy's and Shelley's worlds, which feature dynamic forces at play: atoms, as they conceive the smallest particles of matter, join, leave and rejoin other forms in a dance of life. Singer's book *Romantic Vacancy* finds a further kind of new materialism within language: "the figural finds its counterpart in affect studies and new materialism when it seeks to chart the dynamism of certain forms of matter as one and the same movement as language" (*Romantic Vacancy*, xxxvi). Importantly for my essay, Singer finds in Charlotte Smith's writing evidence of "impossible acts of consumption"; the affect witnessed in her work "coincides and flows through moving materiality itself — human bodies, the landscape and for Smith, poetry's formal and figural turns." (3) While Bennett puts forward a hope that recognising non-human forms of vitality will aid human survival, Shelley's optimism resides in the very human form of art, poetry (*Vibrant Matter*, ix-x). Yet, it does decentre the individual self and the human body, recognising the latter as a composite matter made up of any number of other bodies, which will newly recompose into new forms as the body decomposes.

Transformation in *Adonais*

The usually agreed form of the whole poem divides it into seventeen, twenty-one, and seventeen stanzas, suggesting movement outwards and then returning, while the whole proceeds with an uncharacteristic slow pace described as 'stately and heavily punctuated' by Kelvin Everest (249). What begin in the first quatrain as independent rhymes "abab" in the rhyme scheme of the Spenserian stanza soon are assimilated and merged. Even the rhyming sound of the hexameter having been already introduced in between lines five and seven and

²⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 151.

the rhyme of line six being absorbed by lines eight and nine (ababbcbcc). With a horrible irony, given that the poem concerns a poet killed by the disease of consumption, *Adonais* is fascinated with the act of consuming. As one element feeds on another repeatedly in the poem, a new existence is borne out of the action of digestion and assimilation.²⁸

The poem considers the application of heat and water, and sunshine, on life and growth. Processes of assimilation are mentioned throughout the poem. Acts of consuming, though often used metaphorically, are mentioned sixteen times in the fifty-five-stanza elegy. Many states of water are invoked, primarily dew, tears, mist, frost, ice and rain, and liquid's ability to transform is emphasised throughout.²⁹ The form of the poem, in Spenserian stanzas, and even in the rhyme scheme of this form, mirrors the process of transformation. Everest notes in the Longman edition that when drafting the poem Shelley allowed "all or most of a page to sketch out the shape and ideas for each stanza or pair of stanzas" with the "literal space" on the page "taken up by the Spenserian stanza as an outlining shaping principle" (245). The "outlining shaping principle" is being filled in each stanza with new content, often with repeated phrases and sounds picked up from earlier stanzas or sections being reworked to create something new as the poem progresses.

The "Preface" to *Adonais* ends with a hope that the "unextinguished Spirit" of Keats will "animate the creations" of Joseph Severn's pencil, recognising the care Severn gave to the dying Keats in his last months but also the ability that an artwork has to live. The poem deals with the death of a real person in a mythological, or fictional, way. It asks, what will survive of us and how will we survive? Shelley's poem attempts to achieve a new

²⁸ This can be likened to a modern-day example given by Bennett when she notes "that omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods", 2010, p. vii. Her book asks what it means to reconceive eating as "an encounter being various and variegated bodies, some of them mine, most of them not, and none of which always gets the upper hand?" (*Vibrant Matter*, viii).

²⁹ Singer writes of 'sensibility's liquid economy' in *Romantic Vacancy* (67), and pays attention throughout her book to tears, breastfeeding, as well as rivers and other forms of water.

posthumous existence for Keats's and his own work beyond the grave.³⁰ Other poets have this existence, such as Milton, whose spirit "Yet reigns o'er Earth" (line 36). Being remembered in poetry offers a new kind of life and one that has the potential to last much longer than the physical, material existence of an individual person. That said, poetry also, in its printed form, depends on the materiality of the text, the interest of a readership, and other more mundane commercial factors, as both Keats and Shelley were acutely aware. Singer makes the point that when readers consume poems "they too enact the very figural movement of the poem itself, since the act of reading is an act of inconsumable consumption that depends upon figural movement of a shared affect between nonhuman poem and the reader." (10)

The poem begins with an exclamation that Adonais is dead, that the "I" of the poem weeps for him and demands that we, the readers, should too. There is recognition at this stage though that even the hot tears of our united grief will be impotent. In stanza three, the temperature of tears is highlighted: tears are "fiery" and emitted from a "burning bed" (lines 22, 21). The poem uses oppositions throughout: the heat of the physical, live body is compared to the cold, dead one, just as a "loud" heartbeat is compared to the silence of the grave (line 22). Where we would usually expect hot liquid to help thaw ice, the narrator tells us that "our tears" will "Thaw not the frost which binds" Adonais's head (lines 2–3). At this point, there is a general sense that what is dead is dead. Frost is portrayed as a fixed state not susceptible to change.

There seems to be an accusation in the narrator demanding to know where Adonais's mother, Urania, was when he died. She was not paying sufficient attention to him, distracted by the 'soft enamoured breath' of one of the Echoes who in the act of reciting his poetry:

³⁰ There is an intimation or at least a hope expressed in Shelley's letters that *Adonais* would have positive consequences for Keats's and Shelley's legacy: "I have lately been composing a poem on Keats: it is better than anything that I have yet written & worthy both of him & me." Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2, edited by Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 296.

Rekindled all the fading melodies,
With which, like flowers that mock the corpse beneath,
He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of death. (lines 16-19)

While this idea initially seems to suggest that fading melodies, or poems, can be brought back to life when they are read again, there are some telling problems here. The melodies are “fading” to start with; while they can be “rekindled”, this suggests that they are on a trajectory to nothingness. Her breath rekindles them, but there seems to be no genuine return to life here. Instead, her breath is being mistaken for his. She is speaking his words as the others listen. The “flowers” in the lines quoted above only hide and decorate the true reality, the horrid “bulk”, of death.

Whereas later in the poem (in lines 172–3), flowers will be understood as new life that comes in part from the corpse in the ground, here, the flowers have no connection to the corpse. They merely “mock” the corpse beneath, in the sense of imitate (existing above while the corpse is below the ground in a kind of reflection) but also in their difference: the flowers seem to scorn the corpse by being so vividly alive and pretty. We are told that Adonais had similarly used his poems or songs to adorn and hide his impending death. At this stage in *Adonais*, poems do not acquire new life after the death of the poet, they are merely beautiful and ornamental; they may even be deceptive, dangerous and politically suspect. They do not take part in transformation and nor are they themselves capable of being transformed. The melodies are themselves already fading and the echo that briefly rekindles them only offers an artificial life, an escapism that distracts from the real life that is at that very moment being lost. In this way, Shelley’s poem enacts a philosophical move from a sense of matter as inert to a sense that it is vibrant and with transformative potential.

At this point in the poem, Adonais is simply “gone” (line 24). He is thought to be lost forever. He has descended into the “amorous Deep” and the narrator instructs the reader not

to even dream or imagine that he can be “restore[d]” from there (line 24–5). The poem begins with an ending and a finality, shutting down possibilities and refusing to see the renewals possible in nature and its seasons. Not all great poets will enjoy the continued existence that Milton posthumously experienced; the narrator speaks of work being permanently lost in final terms: ‘suns’, surely with a pun on the word ‘sons’, have “perished”, and others “Have sunk” and are now “extinct”, or lost forever (ll. 41, 43). The idea that a sun can die suggests a worldview where things can be lost permanently, not the reigning idea in chemistry at the time that nothing new can be brought into existence or be permanently removed from the material world.³¹

In a nod to Keats’s “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil”, Shelley imagines Adonais as one “who grew / Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished” (line 47–8). In Shelley’s poem, the flower is pale because it has been nourished, or “fed”, by tears rather than dew. Here, the liquid of tears is recognised in another potential function as the food of plants. Davy writes of the importance of water to plant growth in *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry* (13). But the notion that different types of liquid would produce a different kind of plant seems to have been Shelley’s own. He may have been influenced by Davy or Mary Wollstonecraft, who had *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had written that plants grown in too rich a soil would be delicate as a result, using this idea as a metaphor for women of a certain class (*Works*, 5:73). Shelley did not get this idea from Keats’s poem, where, despite being fed with Isabella’s “thin tears” the plant still grew “thick, and green, and beautiful” (lines 425, 426). Shelley also references here the myth of Adonis, which is featured in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*; when Adonis dies his blood is transformed into the anemone plant. The flowers are likened to

³¹ For example, John Dalton wrote: “No new creation or destruction of matter is within the reach of chemical agency. We might as well attempt to introduce a new planet into the solar system, or to annihilate one already in existence, as to create or destroy a particle of hydrogen.” *A New System of Chemical Philosophy* (London: R. Bickerstaff, 1808), 212.

those that grow pomegranates; both are short-lived, fragile, delicate, and too easily blown away by the wind.

While there is a transformation here, and the tears become assimilated into the plant, the result is imperfect. There is a correlation between the wrong kind of nourishment and a weak and doomed life because the plant has been fed with “true love tears, instead of dew” (line 49). Continuing the simile, Shelley imagines the plant dying just as it was about to bear fruit, with the obvious comparison that Keats was on the cusp of poetic greatness. The plant is imagined as having been destroyed in a storm and the narrator laments a plant “whose petals nipped before they blew” (line 52). The verb “to nip” means here to close in a pinch rather than to open as the plant blooms. There is also the sense of something having been “nipped in the bud”, or not allowed to fulfil its great “promise”; in other words, lost before its time (line 53). It is tempting to read the storm as a metaphor for the negative criticism Shelley believed contributed to Keats’s death; although the storm has now gone, the plant is “broken” and dead (line 54).

Water is often used as a metaphor in the poem and often for its function in giving and maintaining life. For example, using a commonplace comparison, sleep is described as “dewy” and “liquid” when the narrator looks on the yet undisfigured corpse of Adonais and imagines that he might just be asleep. Here, sleep has the same function as water and the sleeping figure seems as though he “takes his fill” of sleep as he would do of water were he alive. The poem also notes that plants, similarly, need the liquid nourishment of dew and rain to survive and grow strong. This can be seen as a precursor to Margrit Shildrick’s argument in *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*: that the issue of what is inside or outside the body is problematic, and subsequently “the very sense that any body can be read as a discrete

entity”.³² But in stanza eight, the actors remain trapped in the physical world, claiming that Adonais will not wake up from the state that he is now in. “Death” is “white”, the colour of decay, and “Invisible Corruption” waits to “trace” indisputable signs on the corpse (lines 66, 67). While “eternal Hunger”, or never-ending decomposition, might be temporarily paused at this present moment, it is ultimately implacable and unrelenting. There seems to be no way back: Adonais will be irredeemably altered in this final transformation. This is the “law / Of change”, which is regarded at this point in the poem in a negative rather than a positive light even while it expresses the notion of never-ending change (lines 71–2).

The poem is concerned with loss rather than rebirth at this stage. Adonais’s “Dreams”, or, by analogy, Keats’s poems, used to be “fed” by the “living streams” of his spirit (lines 76, 75). They no longer move as they used to, “from kindling brain to brain” but instead lie in the place they came from, his heart, which is now cold in death (lines 78, 80). Poems are thus imagined to spring from the heart, which when the body is alive and the heart is warm and beating give the texts impetus to range from reader to reader. The action of their visitation is described as animating, kindling new thoughts in the brains of those who are touched or moved by the poems. A number of processes are described here, from the way that the poems were fed by their creator but go beyond him to kindle others. Movement is imagined as a characteristic of life, and stillness as characteristic of its opposite, death. Adonais’s spirit is imagined metaphorically as streams from which poems feed, perhaps like birds since they are also “winged” and travel in “flocks” (lines 74, 75).

The next few stanzas continue to figure the “Dreams” or poems as varying states of matter but the overriding sense is not of matter transforming endlessly and fruitfully into new states, but of a sense of dissolution. Everest notes that in stanza thirteen specifically the

³² Shildrick is referring specifically to women’s bodies in her book *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism, and (Bio)ethics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 10.

“variety of personified moods, tones and epithets [...] suggest the broad range of Keats’s poetic achievement as a whole” but the point also holds for the stanzas previous to this too (278, n.) The poem is itself changeful in so many ways. Shelley often refers to liquid in the poem, presumably because of its ability to change and transform and assume new shapes.³³ After all, this was one of the major achievements of the chemists of Shelley’s day: to show that water when heated or cooled could assume new form. It is difficult to tell one transparent liquid from another in *Adonais*: one of the Dreams thinks she sees tears on his lashes as proof that he is still alive, “Like dew upon a sleeping flower” (line 86). But the tear is her own and ‘she faded, like a cloud which had outwept its rain.’ (line 90). The simile here is of a cloud that has emptied itself of the rain it held, with the unusual coinage “outwept” perfectly replicating the movement of emptying out. The word imagines the cloud disappearing rather than the rain being assimilated into some new form.

In stanza eleven, dew is described with the adjective ‘starry’ while tears are “frozen” and compared to pearls (lines 91, 95). Both liquids are thus compared to solid states, less flexible and pliable than their liquid counterparts. The ‘starry dew’ is used to wash Adonais “as if” to embalm him and the act of embalming is an attempt to cheat time and arrest the inevitable disintegration that time effects upon the body (line 92). It is an effort to preserve the body in an unaltered condition for posterity.³⁴

In the first section of the poem, “damp death” has rendered Adonais’s lips “icy”, and, using an astronomical metaphor, existence can be extinguished or eclipsed (lines 104, 105).³⁵ Shelley uses another metaphor that involves an alteration in a state of matter here; in this

³³ Mark Miodownik’s recent book explores our modern understanding of the state, *Liquid: The Delightful and Dangerous Substances That Flow Through Our Lives* (London: Viking, 2018).

³⁴ Surprisingly, embalming was not an “uncommon” practice in eighteenth-century Britain according to Jolene Zigarovitch, *Death and the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 58.

³⁵ Later in the poem, in stanza forty-four, “The splendours of the firmament of time / May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not” (lines 389–9).

instance, “the moonlight vapour”, or trail of light in the sky, caused by the death of a meteor. What was once solid, a rock, disintegrates as it becomes hot, leaving only a trace of light as it falls to the ground. It seems to disappear rather than be transformed in the act.³⁶ In the next stanza “Pleasure” leads the funeral procession “Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream.” (l. 117). Caused by rapid cooling, as the weather gets colder in autumn, the water droplets in the air form mist above the stream. This is another change of state that liquid attains and it seems again just to dematerialise. In the example of the meteor, we see the chemical process of evaporation while mist is an example of condensation. Both are changes of state but to the untrained eye they seem to be matter lost rather than transformed.

A metaphorical example of the ability to change substances is given in stanza fourteen: Adonais’s poems are described as “All he had loved, and moulded into thought, / From shape, and hue, and odour, and sweet sound” (lines 118–9). This is the transformative act of poetry: the poet can use their life experiences to create something new. These lines imagine that the material world experienced through the senses (touch, sight, smell and sound respectively) is utilised by the poet and combined to make new creations. It suggests a new life for the poem, though as has already been seen in these stanzas that life might not be long-lived and is capable of self-destruction. A personified “Morning” produces rain rather than dew that obscures the stars in a possible reference to Ovid’s *Aurora* (l. 120, n.).

Metamorphoses is evoked again in the next stanzas which features Echo, Phoebus, Hyacinth and Narcissus. Unlike the earlier echo who in line 15 recited Adonais’s poems, this is “Echo” herself who “feeds her grief with his remembered lay” and as a result refuses to “reply” to the natural elements, birds or human sounds (line 128). In this example, the act of feeding does

³⁶ The recent Davy Notebooks Projects has uncovered Davy’s interest in meteors, which are mentioned numerous times across many notebooks held during his lifetime. One pertinent example, originally from one of his geology lectures, Davy writes about “their ignition, and apparent combustion in the atmosphere, and the vivid light they emit.” Davy, *Collected Works*, 8:237. I am grateful to a volunteer for identifying this reference during the crowdsourcing transcription project.

not result in the creation of something new, it merely enables and further fuels the continuation of the same, old grief. Echoes are often seen as not newly productive, but in this act, Echo is even less creative. Poems that are remembered merely operate in a circular process that generates more grief.

The personified “young Spring” is so full of grief for Adonais that she forgets her identity and throws her “kindling buds” on the ground as though they were “dead leaves” (lines 136, 137). The spring is thus identified with new life and the autumn with death, although of course Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” allows for the potential of new life to rise from the dead leaves blown by the west wind. Phoebus and Narcissus are described as standing “wan” and “sere”; the former suggests a pallid demeanour lacking vitality and the latter dried and withered vegetation. This stanza ends “With dew all turned to tears; odour to sighing ruth.” (line 144). There has been a conversion here with one thing turning to another, though both dew and tears are liquid forms. In the second instance, a smell turns into a sound, though they both perhaps have an airborne quality. There remains though a sense that in turning into another state of being, the dew and odour are diminished and will be lost. The changes that take place in stanzas one to seventeen seem not to offer a future existence to the substance that is being changed.

As Earl Wasserman noted as long ago as 1971, the poem shifts at stanza eighteen.³⁷ The narrator acknowledges the “quickenning life” that has burst from “the Earth’s heart”: “As it has ever done, with change and motion” (lines 164, 165). Shelley comes close here to establishing that this is a natural law. It is the same “law / Of change” mentioned earlier, but here it has more positive connotations (ll. 71-2). The change specified is one of renewal: “airs and streams”, insects, birds, flowers and reptiles, reappear, the latter from their brumation

³⁷ Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971).

during winter. It is otherwise described in *Alastor* as the “wondrous alchemy” that Medea is called upon to enact after the death of the poet figure (lines 672-77; Springer, 80).

In the middle section of *Adonais*, the narrator has moved on a little, and the world has turned too. Everest notes that the “premature and arrested spring of stanza xvi is now supplemented by the emergence of true spring” (286, n.). From thinking that all things tend towards a finality in death and dissolution, the narrator now recognises a repetition or endless cycle in the natural world. But the poem still does not move forwards. This new understanding only takes the reader to the same position again: the world is only new in so much as it has been renewed. The same kinds of birds, insects, flowers have reappeared as were present at the same time last year. There is sense of these creatures as continuing as a species rather than as individual beings.

There is, however, a genuine transformation in the “leprous corpse”, which “Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath” (lines 172, 173). Bennett might term this an example of the “active powers issuing from nonsubjects” (*Vibrant Matter*, ix). Unlike the flowers which mocked the corpse beneath the grave on which they grew earlier in the poem, these “illumine death / And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath” (lines 175–6). The spirit of spring has enabled this transformation: it is because the “leprous corpse” has been “touched by this spirit” that the “flowers of gentle breath” are produced (lines 172–3). The negative association of “leprous” has been transformed into something beautiful. The flowers appear “Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour / Is changed to fragrance”, where light is changed to smell (lines 174–5). The flowers “illumine death” in the sense of illustrating it, pointing to the sight of it again, but also meaning that they give us an understanding of death.

Then follows another iteration of the law of nature with which the poem is most concerned: “Nought we know, dies.” (line 177). The corpse lives again in the form of the flowers. But, there is a terrible irony in the idea that the one thing which seems not to have

any future existence is the thing that is able to know, individual consciousness itself. The narrator describes this consciousness with: “th” intense atom glows / A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose.” (lines 179–80). In his use of the word “atom” here Shelley does not refer to the smallest element that continues to have a future existence because it forms new combinations to create new living beings. This atom is quenched forever, its heat and light extinguished.

In the poem, Urania asks for one last kiss, which, if received, would last longer than any other, kept alive through being fed by ‘saddest memory’ (line 230). Food is thus recognised as essential to life. In contrast, the vultures “Who feed where Desolation first has fed” take their place among the wolves and ravens who, as Everest puts it, are shown to be cowards because they do not venture “to attack directly [their] living prey” (298, n.). They eat what Desolation has first killed and spread “contagion” in doing so. The narrator notes the short lives of lower life forms again, which are born when the sun comes out: “The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn” (line 253). Coming soon after planting the idea of contamination, this might remind us of spontaneously generated life forms, but it certainly demonstrates Shelley’s understanding of how heat in the summer creates ideal conditions for the “ephemeral insect”, or the mayfly, which live for only one or two days (line 254). In *Adonais*, such creatures spawn when the sun rises but die before they see another dawn (line 255). The narrator compares Keats’s critics to these swarms that die after brief existences. But the poet is compared in a simile to the sun that brings them into existence and continues to exist as a star, taking its place among the other stars, after their death.³⁸

In the procession of mourning poets that follows, the image of Shelley himself is of a “Power” always becoming but never realised. In stanza thirty-one, the “frail form” is likened

³⁸ See also Everest: ‘s. was well aware that the sun was also a star; see e.g. his note to *Queen Mab* I 252-3.’ (301, n.).

to “the last cloud of an expiring storm / Whose thunder is its knell” (line 273–4). This simile recollects the earlier reference to a cloud which “faded”; similarly, this is the last cloud of a storm which is ending (line 90). The sound of thunder issuing from the cloud heralds the death of the storm. The “expiring storm” begins a pattern of present participles, using the continuous tense to describe something that is still happening. In stanza twenty-two, there are five of these: “dying lamp”, “falling shower”, “breaking billow”, “withering flower”, and “killing sun” (lines 284–6). There is some evidence that this is the condition of life, to be always in the act of becoming and in the continual present. The life of the “frail form” is thus compared to the new and different existence that Adonais now has.

By the final section of the poem, when there is a new understanding of the state of living, and the narrator recognises that “*We*” are the ones who “decay / Like corpses in a charnel” rather than Adonais, life is typified by change caused by processes of consumption (lines 348–9). In this depiction, living humans are “convulse[d]” and “consume[d]” by “fear and grief” (lines 350, 349). In this image we are being eaten by fear and grief, being assimilated into them and becoming part of them.³⁹ Within our own selves, “cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay” (line 351). The narrator’s use of this simile reveals that things are the inverse of what he originally thought. Instead of worms feasting on the dead body, he here claims that hopes breed and multiply within our living bodies. Here, we are being eaten from the inside even as we also succumb to fear and grief. The social world is diseased in the narrator’s new perspective, and it infects those that live in it.⁴⁰ By dying Adonais is safe from “the contagion of the world’s slow stain” (l. 356).

³⁹ A modern popular science book has explored how understanding the presence of millions of bacteria and other microbes in our individual bodies changes our sense of self, Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grand View of Life* (London: Ecco Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Singer’s chapter on Wordsworth and Shelley focuses on the poets’ presentation of “sensibility’s contagious nature” (64). She finds in their work a material affect that can cross bodily boundaries, “travel from body to body”, and taps into “the invisible circulation of particulate materiality that creates the posthuman affects moving among human and non-human bodies” (64, 65). Mary Fairclough explores a similar effect in electricity as a means of revolutionary communication in her book, *Literature, Electricity and Politics 1740-1840: “Electrick Communication Every Where”* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

The final act of transformation in the poem is of course an acknowledgment of the “Power”, or “spirit’s plastic stress”, the ultimate tool of transformation: its capacious and flexible nature compels beings to assume new forms. The example given is that the “dull” and “dense” material world of “trees and beasts and men” are transformed into “Heaven’s light” (line 387). By these means “the dead live” (line 395). Like Chatterton, Sidney and Lucan, Adonais will continue because he, too, is one “whose transmitted effluence cannot die” (line 407). The poem has finally reached a very different position to that with which it. Where there was despair at the finality of death, there is now a sense of new life possible through art and an idea that life can begin again after death. The final consummation in the poem, is of “the last clouds of cold mortality” (line 486). As in “Mont Blanc”, there is a recognition of what Springer calls “the dissipated, shared materiality that inhabits mountain, snow, wind, light, and breath at once.” (87) At the end of the poem, as the individual is lost in the larger firmament, there is an acknowledgement of what Bennett would consider the “flow” of vibrant matter as “forms swirl around and become an open and living whole” (*Vibrant Matter*, 92).

Conclusion

In *Adonais*, influenced by ancient mythology, Classical retellings of myths, and contemporary chemists, Shelley foregrounded a distinctly dynamic view of the material world. He was alive to the continual changes that the world was undergoing and understood these as processes of assimilation and consumption. These processes were particularly usefully illustrated by metaphors drawn from the changing states of water. In *Adonais*, a poem focused on the transformation from physical death to another state of existence, chemistry offered evidence of a world in continual renovation and renewal.