

Shelley's "Dome of Many-Coloured Glass"

JOHN HARDY AND NICHOLAS BROWN

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity . . .¹

Of these lines in Shelley's *Adonais* W. M. Rossetti wrote in 1891: "Perhaps a more daring metaphorical symbol than this has never been employed by any poet, nor one that has a deeper and more spacious meaning."² More recent scholars have explored the imagery of the poem, overturning the earlier opinion of the poem as "altogether unconnected, interjectional and nonsensical",³ and observing instead how suggestively integrated this striking image and other passages are—in fact, how they often echo and develop themes present throughout Shelley's work.⁴ Our purpose is to suggest that the above lines have a further meaning and significance that have not been noted before.

In his preface to *Adonais* Shelley wrote:

John Keats died at Rome . . . and was buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery of the Protestants in that city, under the pyramid which is the tomb of Cestius, and the massing walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate, which form the circuit of ancient Rome.

Stanza L of the poem reads:

And grey walls moulder round, on which dull Time
Feeds like slow fire upon a hoary brand;
And one keen pyramid with wedge sublime,
Pavilioning the dust of him who planned
This refuge for his memory, doth stand
Like flame transformed to marble . . .

The tomb of Cestius, though in fact itself subject to "Time", seems more permanent than the "grey walls" of the city, both because of what it guarantees as "this refuge for his memory", and (linked with this) because it "doth stand" rather than "moulder", being likened not to "slow fire" that is self-consuming, but to "flame transformed to marble". This "keen pyramid with wedge sublime" seems, indeed, contrasted to "dull Time", being both singular and enduring, and giving a protective and almost joyous ambience to that "newer band" which, in the "field . . . spread" "beneath" it

Have pitched in Heaven's smile their camp of death,
Welcoming him we love with scarce extinguished breath. (449-50)

Cestius's tomb, which seems to be outliving the city that produced it, arguably functions in the poem in an elusive way, and itself undergoes a transformation in the movement of thought that provides the basis for the elegy's "consolation". This is not merely a seeking "From the worlds bitter

1 All quotations, stanza and line-references are taken from *The Complete Works of Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck (Gordian Press, New York 1965).

2 *The "Adonais" of Shelley* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1891), p. 140.

3 Unsigned review, *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*, 8 December 1821, reprinted in *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James Barcus (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1975), p. 298.

4 See especially E. R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Johns Hopkins, Baltimore 1971), ch. 15; E. B. Silverman, *Poetic Synthesis in Shelley's "Adonais"* (Mouton, The Hague 1972); Neville Rogers, *Shelley at Work: A Critical Inquiry* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1967), chs 7, 15.

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wind / . . . shelter in the shadow of the tomb" (457-8). Rather, its full and almost breath-taking complexity is centred in the lines that follow:

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! (460-5)

What makes these lines more than a mere Platonic assertion, or a paradoxical commitment to life in death, is the image of "life" as a "dome of many-coloured glass". Our suggestion is that the image of the "dome" might have been prompted by the earlier image of Cestius's tomb ("one keen pyramid with wedge sublime"), and that a subtle progression of ideas is generated in the process.

A rounded structure is not necessarily implied by the term "dome"—though, because Shelley uses imagery so associatively, it is not necessarily excluded either.⁵ But such a rounded structure is not alluded to in Johnson's reference to "Bodley's dome" in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; nor is one primarily implied by the reference to "a stately pleasure dome" in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". *Domus* meant literally a house or dwelling-place, and hence came to refer to any appropriate structure. Cestius's pyramid was certainly the final resting-place for his mortal remains:

Pavilioning the dust of him who planned
This refuge for his memory.

And such a structure, imagined as glass, would give the prismatic effect of "many-coloured" to the "white" light or "radiance" passing through it. Certainly Shelley's emphasis in describing the pyramid accentuates a prism-like quality—its "keen . . . wedge sublime".

Nor is the "dome of many-coloured glass" to be discounted as something that, in a merely negative sense,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity.⁶

From the beginning of the poem, Shelley has declared that Keats's

. . . fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto Eternity (8-9)

—a sentiment which is located in this world, with a sense of endurance rather than simple transcendence ("unto Eternity" and not "into Eternity"). In stanza XLIII, as part of the statement of the attempted consolation, the poet asserts:

He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely; he doth bear
His part, while the one Spirit's plastic stress
Sweeps through the dull sense world, compelling there
All new successions to the forms they wear;
Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;
And bursting in its beauty and its might
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

What bursts "from trees and beasts and men" is not simply the "white radiance of Eternity", but a brilliance that expresses both the difference

⁵ Cf. Rogers, ch. 7.

⁶ Cf. Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Macmillan Press, London 1981), pp. 196-7; and see also *Prometheus Unbound*, III.iv.116 ff.

and the unity of earthly things: an animating spirit certainly, but not one that denies the qualities of the world it illumines. While the world is seen as mute, too "weak" to express the sublimity of "the One", it should be noticed that the "azure sky, / Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words" (466-7) are in silent, innocent possession of a potential eloquence—hence Shelley's sense of a "fitting truth" they cannot "speak" (468)—something present, appropriate, but often unapprehended. When Shelley says,

The splendours of the firmament of time
May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not (388-9)

he seems to mean precisely such stuff of the material world; but he then goes on to focus instead on the nature of human intelligence, and especially its expression in poetry: "When lofty thought / Lifts a young heart above its mortal law . . ." (392-3). His utterance suggests (to take the stanza as a whole) a reciprocity that is left inexplicit. In the previous stanza (XLIII), there is even the suggestion that the dead poet once made "the loveliness" he is now "a portion of . . . more lovely"—as though, creator-like, his power was itself "many-coloured".

This "life" which "stains" is, then, also positive and creative (unlike the "contagion of the world's slow stain" from which Keats is now imagined as "secure" in stanza XL), though it is necessarily envisaged as something fragmented and, in its mortal aspect, bound to return to "fragments" by comparison with "That light whose smile kindles the Universe" (478). The dead poet's essentially poetic and creative spirit (for which Urania mourns) must be contrasted, not only with those left behind ("*We decay/ Like corpses in a charnel*", 348-9), but also with "the dust" of Cestius—though there is the suggestion (caught up in the comfort and splendour of "pavilioning") that something important—Cestius's memory, at least—survives.

The "keen pyramid with wedge sublime" seems curiously present as "A portion of the Eternal which must glow / Through time and change unquenchably the same" (340-1). E. R. Wasserman notes that the pyramid is "the controlling symbol of the scene",⁷ and this seems true to us in a more fundamental way than he suggests. As a memorial it seems to have a complex aesthetic significance—a significance unusual in Shelley's poetry, given, for example, "*Ozymandias*", or the sentiments expressed in *Alastor* ("dead men / Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around", 119-20), or *Prometheus Unbound* ("ghosts of no more remembered fame", III.iv.169). It is not simply that the tomb of a "man at arms" provides the vocabulary of a soldiers' camp through which to evoke the cemetery.⁸ Unlike the "sparkless ashes" in an "unlamented urn" (360), the pyramid seems to have a "transmitted effluence" that "cannot die / So long as fire outlives the parent spark" (407-8). As a prism-like structure, it serves both as a constant inheritor of "the white radiance of Eternity", and as a constant source of colour and meaning in life. It therefore excels the apparent fragility of a mere "dome of . . . glass" and is, then, a significant image in an elegy to a poet. *A Defence of Poetry* had argued that poetry must work through images of life to intimate transcendence, and it is surely not coincidental (especially given the close proximity of their writing) that Shelley's treatise uses the image of the "prismatic or many-sided mirror"

⁷ Wasserman, p. 493.

⁸ *Ibid.*

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to argue the way poetry unveils, defamiliarizes or colours the world around us.⁹ Moreover, his further image of poetry as “a sword of lightning ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it”¹⁰ is recalled in these lines:

Shall that alone which knows
Be as a sword consumed before the sheath
By sightless lightning? —the intense atom glows
A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose. (177-80)

If the incisive brilliance of a life is terminated before its fulfilment by an arbitrary and momentary strike of “sightless lightning”, then the “intense atom” may still have life in the monument of a poet’s work. The decay of “slow fire upon a hoary brand” becomes instead the light caught and radiated by “one keen pyramid with wedge sublime”.

The unforgettably evocative (if tantalizing) lines of stanza LII may therefore be seen to contain a suggestiveness that is an integral part of what the elegy attempts to face and express; and this is the more convincing given what the action of “Death” is seen to be destroying. In these lines we move beyond such neo-metaphysical assertions as “’tis Death is dead, not he”, beyond even the final resting-place of Cestius “like flame transformed to marble”. The metamorphosis of this image into “life” itself as “a dome of many-coloured glass” acknowledges in a marvellously suggestive way both its ultimate fragility and its potential splendour. Without this acknowledgement in all its painful and yet consoling complexity, Shelley’s last four powerful lines could not have been so surely earned:

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. (492-5)

⁹ See, for example, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Complete Works*, vol. VII, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.