



## Shelley on the nature of poetry (II)

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# Shelley on the Nature of Poetry\*

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## VI. POETRY AND HISTORY

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it. A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole, though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy, were poets; and although the plan of these writers, especially that of Livy, restrained them from developing this faculty in its highest degree, they made copious and ample amends for their subjection, by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images.

The work of the poet, according to Shelley, achieves absolute and perfect universality, while that of the historian either enjoys no universality whatever, or perhaps only attains it where "the interstices of his subjects" are filled with "living images." Although, to us, it would appear difficult to think clearly about the distinction between poetry and history without having determined what sort of universality the work of art may be said to attain and, consequently, without distinguishing poetic universality from scientific, these aspects of the matter give Shelley no trouble because he nowhere clearly separates the speculative order, to which science belongs, from the practical, but is content merely to identify science in a vague way with the activities of "reasoners and mechanists." Our own understanding of the distinction between science and art, to be explained in chapter X, forbids us to accept his claim that a poem can be an example of the truest kind of universality, but we readily agree that it is always a more universal thing than a piece of history, and has therefore far more power over the human mind. This is substantially the doctrine of Aristotle, of course, and in spite of the difficulties occasioned by refusing to history even the limited universality of art, there seems to us no better answer to the question of their inter-relation.

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\* The first part of this article has already appeared in the *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol.IV, n.1.

Let us see now if we can establish with some exactness the special kind of universality which the poet is able to attain.

...The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened but a kind of thing that might happen, i. e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between the historian and the poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse — you might put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle's remark that "poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history," was translated by Wordsworth, who apparently had not himself read the *Poetics*, into the claim that "Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing," and this typically Romantic exaggeration is perpetuated when Shelley declares that "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth." But Aristotle, as usual, must be taken as meaning precisely what he says, and he here offers no grounds for supposing that, because poetry is superior to history in universality, it therefore reaches the highest universality possible. As a matter of fact, he carefully refrains from calling the expressions of the artist simply universals, observing only that they are "of the nature of universals." If examples of true universals be sought for, examples, that is, of statements completely intelligible and always and everywhere true, these will be found only in science. No work of art can be universal in the sense which is true of scientific propositions; no poem can ever be resolved into its component parts like a mathematical equation, nor made the subject of rigid inference like a philosophical thesis.

Indeed, to admit, as Shelley does, that a poem is an image, is implicitly to deny to it the possibility of "eternal truth." The Othello of Shakespeare does not of course represent a certain historical individual who had the misfortune of allowing jealousy to lead him to the murder of an innocent wife; rather he represents a typical man, beset by typical problems and temptations, and becomes the medium for a kind of general significance; so that the tragedy is in no sense a record of particular facts, but a kind of general statement. Yet there is a vast difference between this sort of universal statement and those of science, a difference which may be understood simply by recalling certain attributes of the image. The scientific statement, — we may think of an algebraic formula as the clearest kind of example — is merely a sensible sign, related to a given truth in virtue of convention. But the image proceeds from, and is dependent upon its original; no convention determines its meaning, nor could any other image carry precisely the same meaning. Furthermore, the poetic image is valued for itself alone, as the singular thing that it is, and gains as much of its force from being singular as from being universal; it is because Othello

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, chap.9, 1451a36.

is convincing and real that he moves us, not merely because he has a lesson to teach. The work of art is a unique sort of thing, both as to what it expresses and as to its mode of expression; it is a kind of concrete abstraction; a special type of universal which can be intuitively seized by reason of its singular form, — whereas the conception of science is a universal without qualification which has been assigned a particular symbol only as a necessary and incidental means to its communication. Needless to say, this insistence on the superior universality of science must never lead us to infer that a poem will be more perfect in proportion as it approaches the standards of scientific expression. These two distinct kinds of universality, of science and of poetry, lie in quite opposite directions, so to speak, and represent contrary movements of the mind: the one, tending to abandon the singular and to move by abstraction towards the pure universal; the other, tending to descend from the universal to the singular while retaining the universal. All art is excellent in proportion as it reaches this paradoxical goal, a singular which is yet a universal; and a great work of art owes its beauty and strength as much to its singularity as to its universality. To be convinced of this, we need only attend to the special kind of singularity which the poem or statue enjoys, a singularity distinct from that of the object of nature and of a higher order. The statue of Pegasus is not subject to the same regard we bestow upon a horse at the race-track. The statue is not this figure in stone, over which we may run our eyes or fingers, and which is present to an uncomprehending child as it is to us; rather it is the image, the dynamic form expressive of what ought to be, rendered singular by a sensible form but not in itself sensible, inaccessible therefore to empirical investigation and, while retaining much of the compulsion of a natural object, possessed of the immense advantage of being far more representative. Othello is preferable to any historical personage, not merely as being a universal, but also as being from our viewpoint a better singular.

Since its images are like symbols which can be understood but not translated, that is, which utter a meaning expressible in this single form and no other, poetry cannot help being less universal than science. History enjoys still less universality than poetry. What is the nature of history, then? Is it a kind of feeble art? Or perhaps neither art nor science? To this difficult and controversial question we believe the only intelligible solution to be that of Aristotle, which is here satisfactorily stated by Shelley. History, according to the poet, is neither art nor science; and he might almost be thought to be translating the definition of St. Thomas, *narratio singularium*, when he calls it "a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect."

This drastic limitation of the scope of the historian and this judgement upon the value of his work are not likely to be accepted unless the nature and conditions of his task are fully appreciated. Both scientist and poet enjoy a more advantageous position than the writer of history. Both are in pursuit of an order: the former, of the order of things as they are; the latter, of the order of things as they ought to be. The historian is



forbidden any ideal comparable to these, because the charge that is put upon him is to remain loyal to the world of fact, and the order governing that world is forever inaccessible to reason. To embrace the Design which would explain the confusion and multiplicity of history is quite impossible for man. Even if the initial obstacle of inadequate information could be overcome; even if his knowledge of past events were complete to the last detail, and he were capable of assimilating and retaining the unimaginable mass of evidence implied in such knowledge, man could not possibly enjoy the vision of the Reason which lies behind all these events and is their ultimate explanation. The chief cause of the historian's helplessness before the sequence of facts might seem at first to be the interference of free-will, fortune and chance, which renders so many of them unpredictable. But even if we imagine a world from which these allies and abettors of the irrational were banished, his plight would not be much improved. Granted all events did occur by rigid necessity, there would still be no assurance that a thinker could lay bare the governing principles of history from the study of a past which, at best, could never be more than a section, and an indeterminable section, of total history. The possibility of reliable inference from only a part of the sequence could imply nothing less than this: that the whole train of human events formed a series of the mathematical type, as in calculus, where the knowledge of a few consecutive elements permits the prediction of all the rest. But of course the fact is that, in the world as we know it, necessity, and even decent probability, are far from accounting for all the events, or even for the most important events, in the course of human affairs. From the rise and fall of empires to the little joys and sorrows of domestic life, there is no incident in human existence that may not turn helplessly on some tiny breath of chance. It is by chance a man comes into the world; by chance he is born into a given climate, race and class; by chance his life will often be guided, and upon a chance the end of it may hang. It is not without justification that he sometimes is led to curse the Unreason, rather than the Reason, which seems to have set his course.

Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . .  
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Now, it is this condition of things, this state of turmoil, maintained in the world by the forces of contingency, which determines for the mind the attitude it may assume. Only two choices are possible: either reason will take up these unintelligible facts as materials, to be deliberately recast into the order which reason seems to require; or, like a doctor baffled by some strange malady, the mind will resign itself to reporting what is happening with all possible accuracy and detachment. The first choice will result in poetry; the second will produce that "catalogue of detached facts" which is history as we understand it.

This fundamental obligation to respect the actual fact explains all the distinguishing attributes of history. Like science, history must have

a humble regard for reality, with this difference, of course, that science will confine itself to the study of a kind of fact for which some explanation, even if no more than a tentative one, can be found; whereas history must aim at reaching all the facts. The historian, therefore, is bound by the same strict rules of investigation as the scientist. He must utilise all available sources; comparing and criticising them; judging them, as he himself will be judged, when they are guilty of omission or distortion. But the task of suggesting causes or of drawing practical conclusions is not his; he has nothing to teach for the simple reason that there is nothing to be taught in a sphere where no order nor universality can be perceived. Authentic history cannot escape an irrationality like that of life itself. Moreover, the duty of reaching all the facts is of course an impossible one, for the singular is inexhaustible. Let the historian set himself time-limits as narrow as the modern novel dealing with the stream of consciousness and he will still find himself obliged to practise selection and to resign himself at last to delivering an account that will be only "partial." The tyranny of the fact thus imposes upon history two essential conditions, unintelligibility and incompleteness.

These are hard words, of course, and so uncompromising a relegation of the historian to the function of mere chronicler will not be received with much applause nowadays, when an entirely different attitude, inherited from German idealism, has become traditional. But the contrast we shall now attempt to draw, with Shelley's help, between the work of the poet and that of the historian, should demonstrate that the more appealing solution, which would allow the historian a share in the privileges of the artist, is beset with difficulties much greater than those confronting the Aristotelian view, when that view is correctly understood.

The thinker, condemned to live and move and have his being in a world where everything he values may become the prey of accident and unreason, must seek for escape; and, if this cannot be achieved in fact, will at least attempt it in thought. In this way the constructions of art are born. From materials which may be the very facts of history, an image of human life is built according to the maker's notion of what should be, the work being governed by the sole necessity of achieving an intelligible and convincing result. The re-moulded universe of the poetic imagination cannot avoid the apparent formlessness of the actual universe unless unified by some dominant principles or ideals which will make it possible for all the actions and events of this new world to take on direction and purpose. Nor will the poet's solution seem of any worth to his fellow-man unless the principles which he adopts are generally acceptable as conforming to the permanent requirements of our human nature. In a real sense, therefore, the good poem is no mere fiction but has actual truth; but its truth is truth to human nature, not truth to fact. In the drama men and women act and suffer according to what the human mind deems to be probable, not according to actual probability; the laws which are laid bare, the universality which is achieved by the artist, are not objective; his solution is not of a real problem, nor can it ever alter the fate of the historian,

to whom illogical fact dictates what shall be recorded. In art, the universality which history cannot discover in life is artificially generated by "the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds."

The irreconcilable difference between the world of fact and that of poetry may be made clearer by considering what new and curious laws of being arise as soon as we pass from the former to the latter. The mirror held up to nature by the artist is a magic one which "makes beautiful that which is distorted"; and the metaphor here is more effective than might appear at first glance, for one secret of the power of poetry lies precisely in this, that it is no unbelievable fairyland or impossible utopia that we see reflected in it, but the actual world of daily life, although transformed with such subtle skill as perhaps to lead us to overlook the vast difference between the lovely reflection and the reality. The best way to emphasize this difference is perhaps merely to note that, from the poetic world, chance and fortune in the true sense have been completely banished, so that nothing is permitted to happen except "what is possible as being probable or necessary," while even this possibility is of a peculiar kind and not at all that which is discerned in history. That there is no place for genuine chance in good art is too obvious a proposition to require much comment. In the drama it is not by accident that handkerchiefs are lost and letters miscarry; it is by deliberate design of the author, through whom mishaps of this kind come to have a purpose and function in the growth of the story. The kind of utterly meaningless chance which drives us to the theatre for relief must never be allowed to pursue us there, and the very nearest the poet dare approach to it is when he makes some event occur by chance simply because it is probable or likely that by this time, or in these circumstances, something of the sort would happen. It is clear, therefore, that actual possibility, that of history, is not the possibility which the poet must respect; according to that possibility too many things happen which make no sense whatever, while the poet must seek out only those which have that kind of probability which will render them acceptable to the mind.

So far, poetic possibility appears to be much narrower than actual possibility, and it may surprise us to learn that in another respect it is really much wider. What is possible for the historian, we have seen, may be impossible for the poet. But the reverse is also true: what is downright impossible for the historian may be quite possible for the poet. It does not matter how much history may protest the unlikelihood of such or such a train of events; the artist may use them, no matter how unprecedented or marvellous, so long as he is able to make them convincing. "For the purpose of poetry, a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility."<sup>1</sup> So that, when we condemn a work of art for its lack of "probability," the probability to which we are referring need not be that of real life, since we are not always in a position to be sure whether that

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1461b9.

probability has been violated or not; rather the work is found unsatisfying because it has failed to respect the judgement of the human mind as to what is proper and fitting. That is the kind of possibility we demand in art, nor do we care that it is not always discoverable in life, — "if men such as Zeuxis depicted be impossible, the answer is that it is better they should be like that, as the artist ought to improve on his model."<sup>1</sup>

The acknowledgment of these irreconcilable differences which separate art from history should not, of course, lead to the false extreme of insisting that the poetic has nothing whatever to do with the real, — that would be simply to deny that a poem is an image having some aspect of human life for its original. But it should also be manifest that to disregard these principles of distinction is to invite the worse and more dangerous absurdity of confusing poetry with history. To fall into this last error is to identify the universe of the imagination with the actual one in which we live, by crediting the poet's expressions with the truth of fact; or it is to permit the historian to poeticise his facts and thereby to destroy history by making it fiction. Even if a poet in his work happens to have observed precisely the course of historical events, to read him for the sake of the history is to read him stupidly. No historical poet has any wish to convince us that such or such a person actually lived and actually did these things, but rather that he might well have existed and might well have so acted; the poet employs history only in order that we may attend more readily to the poetry, the reason being, as Aristotle remarks, that what is known to have actually taken place is convincing and can therefore enhance poetic possibility.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there can surely be no thanks due to the writer of history who persuades us that certain events came about in orderly sequence and by reason of these adequate causes and motives, when in fact they did nothing of the kind. When composed by the agents of totalitarian states, this sort of history is easily called by its true name; when produced by a mind of more rational outlook and broader sympathies, it may no longer deserve to be termed outright falsehood, but still requires to be distinguished from history pure and simple.

The great objection to the view of history advanced above is of course that history so defined has never, and can never, be written. It has already been conceded that anything like a complete record of the facts is impossible of attainment; judgement and selection must be practised by the historian, and these imply the exercise of prudence, and of ethical and political science. There would seem no point in demanding that the historian set down the reality itself; he cannot manage that and, even if he could, would produce something quite unprofitable. Surely his function is to interpret, not merely to recount; to throw some light on past events, not to leave them in obscurity and confusion.

The human mind is in a difficult quandary here and must be wary of a natural temptation to take a way out which will gratify its desire for

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *op. cit.*, 1461b10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1451b15.



truth at the expense of the truth. It is essential to realise that the very reason why historical events simply demand that judgement of some sort be passed upon them is in part because they offer in themselves no true basis for such a judgement. This may be made clear by comparing a historical account with the statement of a mathematical theorem, for example: in the latter case the mind will feel no urge to approve or condemn, because the order presented to it is so manifest and unalterable as to render absurd any attitude but simple acceptance; but the tale of a war, a revolution, or an electoral campaign must awaken our moral and political judgement, unless it is simply too uninteresting to be read. Events of this kind, besides being of far more concern to human life than phenomena of chemistry or astronomy, arouse the mind to action by their very intractability; the more unintelligible the fact, the more urgent the protest from intelligence; the more contingent and variable the sequence of events, the keener the pursuit of the hidden laws which must govern them. And yet, in every case where there is not sufficient evidence to found at least a respectable scientific hypothesis, the condition impelling us to pass judgement is precisely that which must oblige us to refrain from judgement or, at the very least, to refrain from falling into the delusion of supposing that the way things should be is the way they are. We cannot think of actual events without thinking them into some sort of order; but if we think at all, we will never identify the order conferred by us on these events with that ultimate order of theirs which must remain beyond the reach of mortal sight. To distinguish the formal nature of history is the object of this discussion and, while it may be true that a book of history will often be valued by reason of the excellence of the ethical and political science and prudential discrimination which it reveals, it is no more possible to define history as a blend of these other disciplines than it is to identify history with poetry. A man may make use of facts in order to construct a better tale than was ever told by history; a man may reason and speculate as to the laws and forces behind the facts, in so far as the facts will allow him to do so; in neither case does he produce history. If history is to have any identity, it can only be by the possession of an object of its own, and that object is simply the singular fact in itself, however unacceptable or hostile it may appear to the poetic or scientific mind.

Nor need we feel disconcerted because the objective set for the historian is an impossible one. Both scientist and poet also pursue goals never to be perfectly realised: the first, the knowledge of natures in greater and greater particularity; the second, the perfect fusion of universal and singular, and of sensuous and intelligible, in the image. Perhaps it is because these last two always win so obvious, if only partial, a victory over the unintelligible, whereas the historian must submit to it, that we have less trouble in identifying them.

A simple example may serve to introduce our final conclusion. When five or six witnesses are called up in court of law to describe what they saw of a street-corner accident, it is obvious that their accounts can never be in agreement down to the last detail. It is also obvious that the duty of

judge and jury is to attempt to reconstruct, from these varying narratives, a picture of what actually happened. Should these officers of the law prefer one story to another because of its superior expressiveness or more rational order, they will no longer be considering them as histories and will be abandoning the only basis for a just judgement, which is the truth of fact. We find ourselves in a similar relationship with history. The writer of history cannot fail to color the facts he is handling, by casting them into an order partly of his own choosing, or by interpreting them according to his own standards; but, if we are to determine the value of his work as *history*, these aspects of it must be ignored. The statement of the scientist we esteem because it is dictated by a manifest order in things with which neither he nor his reader have had anything to do; the design of the poet we also accept because it is pointless to object to an order admittedly independent of fact and composed to suit the desires of the mind; the account of the historian, finally, we accept, and must accept, because it corresponds with what actually happened, — whenever it fails to tell what actually happened, it may not lose all value, but it has lost the value of history. We may agree with Shelley, therefore, that "A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful," since actual events do indeed proceed according to a Design than which nothing would seem more beautiful, were we capable of apprehending it, while recorded facts will not be less historical for lack of design. And it may be possible to add in the same sentence that "poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted," since the disorder and confusion of events as we see them is conquered by the poetic image. But we cannot join him in the opinion that "just history" is truer than that of the epitome by reason of the poetry which it contains, nor in the praise which he bestows upon the great historians when they bridge the gaps in an intelligible series of events by the insertion of persuasive fictions.

#### VII. ART AND MORALITY: BENEFICENT INFLUENCE OF POETRY

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellency of poetry, for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers; it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed. Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his



age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses; the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to their depths in these immortal creations; the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they are by no means to be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled image of unknown evil, before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armor or modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature can not be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendor; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life; nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists. The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in the participation of the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

Homer and the cyclic poets were followed at a certain interval by the dramatic and lyrical poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect in the kindred expressions of the poetical faculty: architecture, painting, music, the dance, sculpture, philosophy, and we may add, the forms of civil life. For although the scheme of Athenian society was deformed by many imperfections which

the poetry existing in chivalry and Christianity has erased from the habits and institutions of modern Europe; yet never at any other period has so much energy, beauty, and virtue been developed; never was blind strength and stubborn form so disciplined and rendered subject to the will of man, or that will less repugnant to the dictates of the beautiful and the true, as during the century which preceded the death of Socrates. Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man. But it is poetry alone, in form, in action, and in language, which has rendered this epoch memorable above all others, and the storehouse of examples to everlasting time. For written poetry existed at that epoch simultaneously with the other arts, and it is an idle inquiry to demand which gave and which received the light, which all, as from a common focus, have scattered over the darkest periods of succeeding time. We know no more of cause and effect than a constant conjunction of events; poetry is ever found to co-exist with whatever other arts contribute to the happiness and perfection of man. I appeal to what has already been established to distinguish between the cause and the effect.

In these passages Shelley for the first time takes up the difficult problem of the relation of poetry to morals. His exposition is rather disorderly and uncertain: after insisting on the immense power for good which poetry can exert over human conduct, he is obliged to face the difficulty that art, even of the highest order, can fall decidedly short of an acceptable morality; to which problem he quickly finds two solutions. These answers seem unsatisfying even to their author, for, after the splendid paragraphs on the drama, to which our next chapter is devoted, and which, though digressive, hold implicit in their magnificent phrases all the principles necessary to a true solution, he attacks the principal difficulty again, this time with more honesty and penetration, if still without complete success. In these ethical matters, we may expect to find our poet's judgements distorted by his reading of the philosophers of the Revolution, although his sense of the true nature and direction of his art is still able to act at times and results in statements as illuminating as any found elsewhere in his work.

The unaccountable effectiveness of poetry upon human conduct, its unobtrusive hold over the minds and hearts of men, is the first subject of consideration, and the secrets of this influence are brilliantly suggested. The poet always causes pleasure, and it is indispensable that he should do so. Yet he is no mere purveyor of sweetmeats; mingled with the delight he offers is true wisdom, which ensures that his influence upon society will be profound and stable, and this wisdom, unlike that of the moralist, will always find the doorway of man's spirit open because of the delightful fashion in which it is presented. Nor is this to be taken to mean that the pleasure of poetry acts merely as a lure and inducement: "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation."<sup>1</sup> The pleasure in artistic imitation is no superficial thing; it is like the taste in food, a natural concomitant and the sign of the naturalness and necessity of that in which it is found. The popular mind, nourishing itself upon poetry, will be as unaware of the strength so acquired as is the case with the individual in normal digestion and, particularly in "the infancy of society," may never give the poet due credit for the stimulus and enlightenment it has received. There is no great difficulty, then, in

<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448b5.

finding sober philosophical meaning in the ardent claim that "it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness." The good influence which poetry brings is not deserved by any effort of ours but enters in so naturally as to seem a heavenly inspiration; the mind being, either unconscious of what is happening, or reluctant to attribute an influence so mysterious and irresistible to a cause with which it is familiar. Opposition or criticism are disarmed by the additional fact that the poet seems quite without design on his audience; he is no eager propagandist or self-interested rhetorician. That lovely voice, like the nightingale's, issues from the depths of an impersonal obscurity, appearing to utter simple truth and beauty rather than to be attempting to move or persuade. This self-effacement is necessary for the artist because, as will be explained later, he is essentially a maker and neither a doer, nor primarily even a teacher; his aim is to fashion a beautiful object, and his first devotion is to the good of his work. His productions draw their peculiar effectiveness from this, that, as things made, they stand by themselves and seem to speak for themselves, relying no more on the authority or persuasive skill of their originator than do the statements of pure science, yet with none of the dry inadequacy of the latter. Shelley's comparing of the poet to the nightingale also reminds us of the naturalness and inevitability of the mental processes and mode of expression which culminate in this kind of utterance. Poetic speech invites contradiction as little as the song of a bird or any other music of nature, its inevitability leaving no room for correction or improvement. True, the voices of nature never carry the intelligible meaning offered by the human artist; but, even though his message may be partly translatable into propositions susceptible of critical discussion, who will feel inclined to treat it in this fashion?

For these reasons, it is easy to admit that the genius of a poet like Homer must have contributed greatly to the building of the social system of ancient Greece; although the analysis here offered of the manner in which such work can actually bring about the moral improvement of society is not nearly so satisfactory as that found in the discussion of the power of tragedy which is to come a little later.

No sooner has Shelley praised the moral elevation of the great Greek epics, than he recalls that it is far from being consistently sustained, seeing that some of the famous heroic figures of these works are scarcely authentic exemplars of virtue, and he is now led to a first attempt to explain how true poetry may sometimes appear to be in conflict with morals. This first solution seems influenced more by a passionate desire to protect the purity and spirituality of his art than by honest thinking. The great poet, he insists, knows very well how crude and deficient are the moral notions of his age, but deliberately allows his personages to assume them, as a "temporary dress" which will cover without concealing their true grandeur of soul; or it may well be, he goes on to say, that unless subdued by some such earthly garb, the beauty and splendor of a great artist's conceptions would prove too dazzling for mortal sight. The implication is that the poet is in conscious possession of a moral code far more elevated than that of the

vulgar, so that, if he thought his hearers capable of it, he might reveal to them eternal truth in all its splendor. To so emphasize the role of the ideal in poetry is certainly understandable, since the poet is of all men the least willing to leave the world as he finds it; but what Shelley seems to overlook is that the poet's function as poet is precisely to "temper this planetary music to mortal ears," to bring an ideal perfection within sight and touch of men. For an artist, then, expression of the eternal in the language of time and place is no matter of conscious choice; it is spontaneous and essential to his work. It is no compliment to the poet as artist to attribute to him the power of conceiving an ideal more sublime than that which he has expressed; in this respect the moral philosopher may easily surpass him and, of the two, it is also rather the latter who exhibits his conception in all "its naked truth" — thereby leaving us bored and discouraged. Mere ideals, in short, offered in their abstract purity, are never poetry; nor has the artist either the means or intention of dealing with these or any other principles directly, his business being rather to imitate them so as to give them sensible and convincing form by expression in terms of human experience. It is absurd to think of the Homeric figures as wearing their vices like a superficial costume hiding a deeper beauty within: the camouflage and disunity in the poetic image implied by such a notion constitute a denial of its very nature. Moral defects inserted into a dramatic portrait are necessary if it is to be effective, and are as much a part of the integral unity as the virtues; far from being "an accidental vesture" hiding the "beauty of the internal nature," they are the very means of its artistic expression. That the attitude of the drama towards the vices and follies of men should vary from age to age is only further proof of the poet's obligation to express himself in terms of the world which he and his hearers know. Shelley is perfectly right in suggesting that such dramatic representations, in spite of their obvious moral defects, seem to suggest a perfection which they do not state and can inspire the spectator to desire something still higher; but this is simply in virtue of their power as images, not because of some absolute perfection actually lying concealed within them which the poet could have fully exposed had he wished.

As if himself dissatisfied with the explanation he has just given, the poet, at the beginning of his next paragraph, turns to a new solution, based this time on the special mode in which poetry produces its moral effects. Passing over the assertion that "ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created," we may note with approval the marked difference which Shelley finds in the manner and efficacy of their operation. Ethics, making its appeal directly to reason and experience, instructs and admonishes, but does little to create a good disposition in men. Poetry acts in "another and a diviner manner," a manner the more effective because indirect and difficult to observe, and in virtue of which, Shelley is convinced, a work of art can somehow or other do good even when its subject is morally reprehensible. That this conviction has a basis in true principles we shall attempt to show later; but the poet's own earnest attempts at justifying it are clearly unsatisfactory and we are obliged to consider the present one even weaker than the first.



To understand what he is propounding here, it must be recalled that his reading of Godwin and other revolutionary philosophers had led him to an ethical theory resting on the belief that the innate benevolence of man was such that no person conscious of the misery of others could possibly be unwilling to relieve it. If anyone is hard and selfish, it can only be because, being uninstructed and deficient in power of apprehension, he is simply unaware of the pain and injustice he is causing; he lacks that power of imagination which would enable him to feel and share the sorrow of others. "The only distinction between the selfish man and the virtuous man," Shelley declares elsewhere, "is, that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, whilst that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference. . . . Selfishness is the offspring of ignorance and mistake."<sup>1</sup> Hence, to bring about the conversion of the wicked, what is required is not the imparting of moral principles nor the exposing of the unreasonableness of the offender's conduct, but simply the stimulation and development in him of his power of imagination, which is "the great instrument of moral good." So it is the poet, more than anyone else, who can really work a cure; "poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb," and it follows that "disinterested benevolence is the product of a cultivated imagination, and has an intimate connection with all the arts . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The warm-hearted unrealism of this doctrine, so characteristic of Shelley, invites sympathy, if it cannot deserve much consideration from intelligence. The real difficulty of moral conduct, namely the presence or absence of goodwill, is simply denied by the romantic belief in the native goodness of man; it is no longer the power of choice, but the mere power of knowing and feeling, which becomes the determining influence in a man's acts, so that a persuasive presentation of noble ideals is all that is needed to bring about the conversion of the most thorough scoundrel. But there is one idea in this exposition to which Shelley clings persistently and, as we hope to show, with good reason: it is that poetry does not act directly to change the lives of its hearers and that this indirectness is essential to its influence. Like every true artist, Shelley has an instinctive horror of didacticism.

#### VIII. TRAGEDY

It was at the period here adverted to that the drama had its birth; and however a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that the art itself never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens. For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institution, to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity one towards the other. On the modern stage a few only of the elements capable of

<sup>1</sup> From the fragment, *Speculations on Morals*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

expressing the image of the poet's conception are employed at once. We have tragedy without music and dancing, and music and dancing without the highest impersonations of which they are the fit accompaniment, and both without religion and solemnity. Religious institution has indeed been usually banished from the stage. Our system of divesting the actor's face of a mask, on which the many expressions appropriated to his dramatic character might be moulded into one permanent and unchanging expression, is favourable only to a partial and inharmonious effect; it is fit for nothing but a monologue, where all the attention may be directed to some great master of ideal mimicry. The modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy, though liable to great abuse in point of practice, is undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic circle; but the comedy should be as in *King Lear*, universal, ideal, and sublime. It is perhaps the intervention of this principle which determines the balance in favor of *King Lear* against the *Oedipus Tyrannus* or the *Agamemnon*, or, if you will, the trilogies with which they are connected; unless the intense power of the choral poetry, especially that of the latter, should be considered as restoring the equilibrium. *King Lear*, if it can sustain this comparison, may be judged to be the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world, in spite of the narrow conditions to which the poet was subjected by the ignorance of the philosophy of the drama which has prevailed in modern Europe. Calderon, in his religious Autos, has attempted to fulfil some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare; such as the establishing a relation between the drama and religion, and the accommodating them to music and dancing; but he omits the observation of conditions still more important, and more is lost than gained by the substitution of the rigidly-defined and ever-repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition for the living impersonations of the truth of human passion.

But I digress. — The connection of scenic exhibitions with the improvement or corruption of the manners of men has been universally recognized; in other words, the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct or habit. The corruption which has been imputed to the drama as an effect begins when the poetry employed in its constitution ends; I appeal to the history of manners whether the periods of the growth of the one and the decline of the other have not corresponded with an exactness equal to any example of moral cause and effect.

The drama at Athens, or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age. The tragedies of the Athenian poets are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, stripped of all but that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become. The imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived; the good affections are strengthened by pity, indignation, terror and sorrow, and an exalted calm is prolonged from the satiety of this high exercise of them into the tumult of familiar life; even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice. In the drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

The subject of the drama seems to be taken up by Shelley at this point because of the close relation between the theatre and social morality, but he makes little attempt to fit his remarks on this new theme into his discussion of the relation between art and morals, beginning as he does, with a confessed digression, wherein he contrasts the richness of the Greek dramatic medium with the poverty of our own and, even when it is a question of the tremendous power over human conduct of high tragedy, disregarding completely the problem of its possible direction towards evil as well as good.



The moderns, according to his first paragraph, have made a profound error in depriving the drama of the cooperation of music, painting, the dance and religion. By a rather unusual choice of terms, he states that, in bringing about this separation, they have missed the true philosophy of the drama, so that we are led to think that for him all these secondary factors, if used in conjunction with the stage, become essential and indivisible elements of a single art. If this be his meaning, it does not seem in accord with the only critical study representative of the comprehension of their theatre enjoyed by the ancient Greeks themselves; Aristotle plainly distinguishes tragedy from the arts which accompanied it in the classical age and even appears to acknowledge that a play can be a complete entity apart from its representation on the stage.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, it seems that modern tragedy, in dispensing with the aid of the other arts, has admittedly lost something in magnificence and solemnity, and now makes a greater demand on the audience; but by this very sacrifice it has gained in directness and intensity of effect. However, the point is a minor one and perhaps does not deserve special notice.

The only other matter requiring our attention in this passage is the remarkable acknowledgement of the manner in which comedy can procure "an extension of the dramatic circle." Shelley, who appears to have been deficient in humour, and could not endure what seemed to him the cruelty of the comedy of manners, was perhaps the better able to appreciate the sublimation which comedy should undergo before it is allowed a role in great tragedy, as well as to feel how perfectly this is realised in *King Lear*. In Shakespeare's play, humour is not used to provide relief; nor surely to heighten by contrast the horror of actions already dreadful enough; it serves rather to permit a detachment and comprehension which could be attained in no other way. Within the play, the Fool has an uncanny air of seeming to reflect the king's own inner conscience, the sane and just counsel which his reason utters but which passion, pride and self-will prevent him from translating into conduct. If we remember that what is called sense of humour is no sense at all, but the expression of intellect in its most detached attitudes, this strange personage may be interpreted as the sense of humour of the king himself, his power of judging the incongruity and folly of his own acts, — which has somehow become separated, and follows him about, loyal and steadfast to the end, but unable to pay respect where it is not deserved, and irremediably exiled from the mind which should be its seat:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!

Beat at this gate that let thy folly in

And they dear judgement out.

Seen from outside, from the dramatist's standpoint, the Fool is the indispensable means of "extending the dramatic circle" to make possible an ultimate criticism. Like the chorus of Greek tragedy, but in a far more thorough fashion, he represents a supreme detachment of view. And whether he

<sup>1</sup> *Poetics*, 1450b17, 1453b1-12.

be considered as a personage contributing to the living whole of the plot, or as an instrument for the expression of the playwright's views, his foolishness is essential to him. The deepest reason for this lies in the fact that it would simply be contrary to dramatic probability to have judgements like his pronounced by a normal person, since it is an inevitable consequence of our servitude to passion and our embroilment in the concerns of life that we expect and are willing to receive such wisdom from such personages only as are somehow immune from these toils, like the child, or the man who has remained childlike of mind. The tragic poet, then, who would have pure intellect enter upon his scene, who would pass a higher than human sentence upon the deeds of men, must, like Heaven itself, "use the foolish things of this world to confound the wise." At this height comedy encourages meditation rather than laughter, and indeed deserves, in Shelley's words, to be considered "universal, ideal, and sublime."

In the second paragraph of the group the principal subject of discussion is recalled with a reference to the unfailing parallel observed between the condition of the theatre and the prevailing morality, yet still without any attempt to face the chief difficulty in the question of art and morals, which is to explain how works, apparently excellent from an artistic viewpoint, can seem to violate the basic principles of ethics. All we find is the unhelpful assertion repeated that any art which does mischief is not true art, and this is followed in the last paragraph by an exposition of the manner in which great drama procures a good effect on human conduct. The magnificent sentences given to this purpose do not, accordingly, advance us very far in the direction we are supposed to be moving, but retain an immense value for the light they shed on the nature of tragedy and of art itself.

Shelley begins by noting for a second time that greatness in the drama has "ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age." Although the matter is of no great importance, it might be well to offer something of a corrective to the poet's enthusiasm by remarking that this co-existence need only mean that high moral and intellectual ideals were esteemed or, perhaps, merely acknowledged at the time such drama was composed. Its composition does not necessarily suppose that such high ideals were actually accepted. A high Christian morality might easily be appreciated by a modern audience, for example, which had no thought or intention of applying it, but which had merely retained enough of the traditional attitudes and sentiments of Christianity to be able to enjoy and admire that in which it no longer believed. The defence of great art does not require that we be able to point to the tangible and measurable good it has accomplished; and Shelley is wiser when he sets out to expose the inner working of great drama and to show merely that it is of a nature powerfully to transmit high moral principles to the public.

The comparison of the great Greek tragedies to "mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself" is a fine testimony to the necessity of the image for all forceful human communication. Simple reflection or self-examina-

tion remains an imperfect and difficult mode of knowing and, in a sense, even an unnatural one. As was suggested in an earlier chapter, it is always more effective to offer the mind an object it can reach directly and upon which all the mental faculties may be exercised. "Neither the eye nor the mind," we are told a little later, "can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles." The spectator attains the truest view of himself in the images of his own life and character which are set before him on the tragic scene, catching vivid reflections of his own nature in good and evil personages alike.

But the image of self he is given is not a simple, unchanged reflection; what he sees is self "under a thin disguise of circumstance," — the disguise being that which is adverted to, while causing the spectator not to advert to the effect the play is having upon him. Under this convincing cloak of character and incident, the general principles or types of action are able to get by his defences and to demand the assent of inner conscience. This is the fictional aspect of the play, which must be neither very pronounced, nor very slight. The first extreme would mean the stifling of meaning and universality, and the mere provision of distraction without enlightenment, as in melodrama. The second would mean a weakening or destruction of the nature of the image, so that the dramatic personages would become little more than articulate concepts, dull and unconvincing. The disguise of circumstance must be thin, therefore, but never absent. By various means, of which the tragic mask was one, the Greeks made sure that it would remain thin. Through a device of this kind the tragic personage could be sufficiently removed from the circumstances of daily life so as to appear unmistakably a significance as well as a man, and there would then survive upon the stage only that "ideal perfection which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become." The mask contributed to the achievement of a final effect which was total and integral, not "partial and inharmonious," as is the result, according to Shelley, when modern drama places its reliance on the actor's countenance, and skill in simulating emotion.

This ideal perfection is spoken of as internal; it lies within us. Great tragedy neither preaches, nor exhorts, nor even urges to emulation; it simply enables us to discover our own essential greatness by furnishing an image of our nature stripped of all the accretions and meaningless attributes of ordinary existence. This human nature, whose unchangeable forms are portrayed so compellingly by the heroes of the stage, is shared by the humblest onlooker and, in the dramatic mirror, he may see himself as he should be and may make comparison between his own turbulent world of passion and unreason and the ideal condition it might reach. Here, on the tragic scene, all things are set in a true and clear light. Beauty and goodness wear that unmistakable crown of excellence which they do not always show when met with in the street, and are known for what they are. Wicked characters, as well as good, are made to serve the ideal; first, because in them evil takes clear shape and is half-conquered simply in being comprehended; secondly, because they suggest, and heighten by

contrast, the very ideals which they violate. Poetry, therefore, in the exquisite phrases of a later paragraph, may not only "exalt the beauty of that which is most beautiful," but also "add beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change." Within the magic bounds of the image, all becomes one, intelligible, purposeful; "it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes."

When a few sentences in praise of tragedy can carry such beauty and conviction, what shall be said of the influence of tragedy itself? By its power the imagination will be "enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty...": the audience's power of grasping and conceiving is strengthened by the comprehension of a great and typical human struggle. The ideals of great tragedy, which are the permanent expression of the laws of our nature, strengthen the inclination of the beholder to realise them in his own life; strengthen, in other words, his natural love of what is true, just, and honorable. And they achieve this end by arousing the "good affections," pity and fear, where these are due; compassion for the sufferings of the innocent, indignation and horror at the sight of evil triumphant. It is never simple stimulation of feeling which is the aim of tragedy; emotions for their own sake are the business of melodrama and, if not without a certain recreational value, can never deserve to be called good as the word is used here, nor can they promote that "exalted calm" which extends its influence into real life. The emotional exercise concerned in tragedy is one which brings about a certain discipline and harmony in the passions, so that the passion felt in the theatre will be vastly different from that felt in the street, the former never endangering the dominion of reason.

For the basic thing to remember about passion is that it is indeed passion, the imposition upon us of physical disturbance which is the inevitable consequence of the dependence of intellect upon sense. Often enough, reason cannot foresee, cannot even interpret, the confusion of feelings by which it may be suddenly overwhelmed. Man is gloomy or gay without cause, longs for he knows not what, or finds himself, at some event, an inextricable tangle of conflicting feelings. And even when there exist good and unmistakable causes for his sentiments, there is still an obscure subjection of intellect in all strong emotion from which we demand release, it being something like a contradiction of the nature of intelligence that it should be made to endure what it has not chosen, and to a degree beyond the measure it would apply. The tragic poem procures for us this liberation by giving us an image of passion towards which we can take an attitude of contemplative detachment, quite impossible where the passion is personal and actual. Within the little world of the play, there is nothing to bewilder or disconcert; the passion here, however overwhelming or uncontrolled in representation, can never arouse uncontrollable emotion in the onlooker, since, in true drama, it is presented as an object of thought as well as of feeling, and hence as always in harmony with the design of the whole play.

Tragedy, therefore, arouses feelings purged of that irrationality inseparable from the passion of daily existence. Under its influence, our feelings follow a certain harmonious conduct and sequence, whereby we never seem to lose sight of what we are feeling and why, and in the course of which our self-control is never threatened. Thus, the villain of the play, monster though he may be, is an image delightful to the mind, if only for this reason, that he makes possible an untroubled consideration of wickedness that could scarcely be borne were it actual. Besides which, the artistic intelligence has constructed his character so that it makes sense, so that we may know just how to feel towards him, so that our hatred of him is free and detached, so that we detest with the mind. In the preface to his own tragedy, Shelley remarks:

This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it would be insupportable. The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring.<sup>1</sup>

Here is our principle, clearly enough expressed, although we would be inclined to reject the implication in the last phrase that there is poetry in actual crime even before the dramatist has worked on it; it may be an object capable of being seen poetically, perhaps, but can hardly be termed poetry before it has been so seen and expressed.

The influence of art upon the passions, then, is instructive and disciplinary; it arouses them according as it is right that they should be aroused, in relation to proper objects, and in the measure that these objects deserve.<sup>2</sup> A work of art can thus become, in a certain sense, a rehearsal for life, offering us semblances of good and evil upon which we may practise our minds and, at the same time, suggesting the judgements we ought to pass. Not that it will ever be possible really to live the play, or always to see how actual incidents may be made to fall into the enviable order and solution which the skill of the dramatist has conferred upon those of some great tragedy. The gulf between the real and the poetic is simply unbridgeable; it is irrational to attempt to transpose the two and more irrational still to condemn poetry because it does not offer us a scheme translatable into fact. Human life is at the mercy of chance and change and it is a delusion to hope that we shall be able to live from day to day by any means other than the improvisations of prudence. Yet the drama can plainly exert great influence over our lives, being, no mere escape from life, but a noble attempt to understand it, addressing itself to us by the most effective of all means of communication, chastening and clarifying our emotions, in order that we may behold in a calm, clear light ideals which, in the tumult of familiar existence, it is only too easy to neglect.

<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense his strange remarks on sorrow in a later paragraph should probably be interpreted: "Tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. . . . The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself." There is no comfort in actual grief; it is the pleasure caused by an image of grief which is unique.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *Art et scolastique*, p.107.



"Even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature." The tragedy of fate, which the poet clearly has in mind, supposes in its audience a high degree of intelligence, able to find relief in any solution, no matter how terrible. Under the shadow of fate, crime cannot, of course, be true crime, since it is no longer the effect of free will; "like flies to wanton boys," men writhe in the clutches of the gods, and find their only refuge in dignity and defiance. But it is hardly to be supposed that Shelley finds in this explanation the same detached satisfaction which it provided to the Greek mind. Probably it is the pity of the Greek drama which stirs him more; the romanticist in him being overcome at the spectacle of goodness and innocence driven by ignorance, or by the pressure of seemingly irresistible causes, to the commission of some foul deed. All crime tends to be seen in the same way by romanticism, as error, mistake, or the result of chance rather than purpose. Beatrice Cenci is described as "evidently a most gentle and amiable being, a creature formed to adorn and be admired, and thus violently thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion." Her act of parricide, a "pernicious mistake," is stated to have been voluntary, yet to have been committed under such diabolical provocation as to compel us to consider her an object of compassion rather than of condemnation.

Being thus convinced that error must be "divested of its wilfulness," Shelley naturally feels that "drama of the highest order" will necessarily take up the fate-theme and, since it will not permit men to look upon evil "as the creation of their choice," will allow them to find in it "little food for censure or hatred." But we are obliged to maintain against him that the tragedy of fate is not the highest possible, if only because it is not the truest. Genuine malice is only too vivid a fact of human experience, and the best poetic image will imitate it as such. That crime, by virtue of the image, will always be "disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion," has already been shown to be true for reasons intrinsic to the nature of art and having nothing to do with any particular view of life; but it may yet be presented as a deliberate act, justly deserving of censure and hatred. The blackest scoundrel, it is true, may inspire a certain sympathy for the reason that the vicious tendencies we see carried to an ultimate pitch in him are those of our common nature, so that we cry "God forgive us all," but this carries with it no obligation to condone. Similarly we can agree that even a portrait of vice may teach us self-knowledge, but it will surely leave us small self-respect.

In the splendid periodic sentence which brings to a close the passage we are studying, authentic drama is compared to a mirror which not only possesses many facets, capable of receiving light from many directions, and of casting back reflections of the subject in all its postures and attitudes, but also exerts the virtue of the prism, to reveal the hidden color and heart of the radiance which falls upon it. This magic glass, held up to human nature, collects its brightest rays, and divides them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, reproducing them as so divided. It touches the



brightest rays of human nature with an even higher majesty and beauty, multiplying all that it reflects, and endowing all that it reflects with the faculty of generating a power like its own.

Itself a piece of poetry, this great final sentence is an illustration of the principle explained in our first chapter, whereby the poetic image was held to proceed from two originals, as it were, an actual and an ideal, and to express one in terms of the other. Wishing to convince us of the power of dramatic art to draw the disparate elements of life towards an integral whole, Shelley chooses, not to state the truth directly, but rather to offer a splendid image of it. The result, odd though it may sound, is like an image of the doctrine of imitation, and is susceptible of two mutually supporting interpretations, according as we approach the passage from the direction of the actual or the ideal. For the light caught by the dramatic mirror might first be thought of as deriving from ordinary human life, being the rays of significance which the poetic vision can detect in even the humblest doings of mankind and which it has power to withdraw or separate from the contingent and meaningless, in order to gather them into a central meaning much as the scientific mind carries a process of induction from many individual cases towards the goal of a general law; the reward of the mind's labor in both instances being a final truth which can serve to illuminate difficulties and problems previously insoluble and become the means of dealing with those yet to be encountered. The preface to *The Cenci* again has something to offer us:

Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.

But the simile of the mirror need not be taken as excluding the idealising power of poetry, for the "brightest rays of human nature" may also be considered as coming forth, not from everyday, pedestrian human nature, but from ideal human nature, being the pure radiance of its "unchangeable forms"; which will be tempered for mortal eyes by the prismatic potency of art. The fact that the rays are spoken of as being divided and reproduced from "the simplicity of their elementary forms" would seem to favor the present interpretation, according to which a given play would transmit eternal principles by giving them expression in character, opinion and incident, imparting to them color and conviction, and driving them home as a teacher will convey a central principle by a series of examples and illustrations, conferring upon it by such means a richness and force no mere straightforward statement can ever possess. In either case, it should be noted that the general effect will be to present a unity which overcomes, without annihilating it, a multiplicity; and a meaning which gathers into itself the unmeaning.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Aristotelian mind will probably be inclined to see the poetic process as more essentially the drawing of a universal from the contingent and particular, but of course without excluding the other possibility. "The thing which makes a good man different from a unit in the crowd... or an artistic representation different

The phrases which follow, and in which the poetic mirror is said to multiply all that it reflects and to touch it with majesty and beauty, are again themselves comparable to a double-sided mirror. According to our first alternative, it might be argued that, as each incident or detail from the unintelligible plurality of life enters into the new unity of the work of art, it is "multiplied," that is, raised to a higher power, to an intensity of significance it never possessed before. Like the forest pools in one of Shelley's most charming poems, the drama will reflect what it has received "with more than truth expressed,"<sup>1</sup> transmuting matters of fact into universal meanings; the commonplace, nay, even the ugly and the evil, as we have said already, will be, through this sublime influence, "touched with majesty and beauty" by their assignment to a necessary role in the working out of some lofty purpose. But, following the second alternative, the elemental features of ideal nature which it is the function of poetry to reflect, would be "multiplied" in the sense of their embodiment in innumerable plays, or in the many personages, incidents and images of a single play; and would be "touched with majesty and beauty" in that their colorless and formless essence, or the bare meaning for which science can teach respect but not love, would be adorned and made irresistible by being clothed in music and imagery taken from the world about us.

Finally, from whatever source the drama be thought to have drawn its significance, it will possess, as a statement having the nature of a universal, the power of "propagating its like," that is, of reaching an indefinite multitude of minds and of being applicable to a multitude of particular cases. As we shall see later, it is the especial virtue of the image to appear inexhaustible in significance and forever to invite new interpretations.

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from an ordinary reality — is that elements which are elsewhere scattered and separate are here combined in a unity. [It is this unity which counts]; for if you take the elements separately, you may say of an artistic representation that it is surpassed by the eye of this person or by some other feature of that."—*The Politics of Aristotle* (trans. E. BARKER, Oxford, 1946), chap.xi, 1281b.

<sup>1</sup> *To Jane: The Recollection*. Several lines of this poem are pleasant instances of a true poet's instinctive awareness of the power of the image:

We paused beside the pools that lie  
Under the forest bough. —  
Each seemed as 'twere a little sky  
Gulfed in a world below;  
.....  
In which the lovely forests grew,  
As in the upper air,  
More perfect both in shape and hue  
Than any spreading there.  
.....  
Sweet views which in our world above  
Can never well be seen,  
Were imaged by the water's love  
Of that fair forest green.  
.....  
Like one beloved the scene had lent  
To the dark water's breast,  
Its every leaf and lineament  
With more than truth expressed.

## IX. POETRY AND MORALS RESUMED

But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the forms of the great masterpieces of antiquity, divested of all harmonious accompaniment of the kindred arts; and often the very form misunderstood, or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines which the writer considers as moral truths, and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected. Hence what has been called the classical and domestic drama. Addison's 'Cato' is a specimen of the one; and would it were not superfluous to cite examples of the other! To such purposes poetry cannot be made subservient. Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it. And hence we observe that all dramatic writings of this nature are unimaginative in a singular degree; they affect sentiment and passion, which, divested of imagination, are other names for caprice and appetite. The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II, when all forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone, illuminating an age unworthy of him. At such periods the calculating principle pervades all the forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them. Comedy loses its ideal universality; wit succeeds to humor; we laugh from self-complacency and triumph, instead of pleasure; malignity, sarcasm, and contempt succeed to sympathetic merriment; we hardly laugh, but we smile. Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life, becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting; it is a monster for which the corruption of society for ever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret.

The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form. And it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles. And this is true with respect to poetry in its most extended sense; all language, institution and form, require not only to be produced but to be sustained; the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, no less than as regards creation.

Civil war, the spoils of Asia, and the fatal predominance first of the Macedonian, and then of the Roman arms, were so many symbols of the extinction or suspension of the creative faculty in Greece. The bucolic writers, who found patronage under the lettered tyrants of Sicily and Egypt, were the latest representatives of its most glorious reign. Their poetry is intensely melodious; like the odor of the tuberose, it overcomes and sickens the spirit with excess of sweetness; whilst the poetry of the preceding age was as a meadow-gale of June, which mingles the fragrance of all the flowers of the field, and adds a quickening and harmonizing spirit of its own which endows the sense with a power of sustaining its extreme delight. The bucolic and erotic delicacy in written poetry is correlative with that softness in statuary, music, and the kindred arts, and even in manners and institutions, which distinguished the epoch to which I now refer. Nor is it the poetical faculty itself, or any misapplication of it, to which this want of harmony is to be imputed. An equal sensibility to the influence of the senses and the affections is to be found in the writings of Homer and Sophocles; the former, especially, has clothed sensual and pathetic images with irresistible attractions. Their superiority over these succeeding writers consists in the presence of those thoughts which belong to the inner faculties of our nature, not in the absence of those which are connected with the external; their incomparable perfection consists in a harmony of the union of all. It is not what the erotic poets have, but what they have not, in which their imperfection consists. It is not inasmuch as they were poets, but inasmuch as they were not poets, that they can be considered

with any plausibility as connected with the corruption of their age. Had that corruption availed so as to extinguish in them the sensibility to pleasure, passion, and natural scenery which is imputed to them as an imperfection, the last triumph of evil would have been achieved. For the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and therefore it is corruption. It begins at the imagination and the intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralyzing venom through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which hardly sense survives. At the approach of such a period, poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed, and its voice is heard, like the footsteps of Astraea, departing from the world. Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life, the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time. It will readily be confessed that those among the luxurious citizens of Syracuse and Alexandria who were delighted with the poems of Theocritus were less cold, cruel, and sensual than the remnant of their tribe. But corruption must utterly have destroyed the fabric of human society before poetry can ever cease. The sacred links of that chain have never been entirely disjoined, which descending through the minds of many men is attached to those great minds, whence as from a magnet the invisible effluence is sent forth, which at once connects, animates, and sustains the life of all. It is the faculty which contains within itself the seeds at once of its own and of social renovation. And let us not circumscribe the effects of the bucolic and erotic poetry within the limits of the sensibility of those to whom it was addressed. They may have perceived the beauty of those immortal compositions, simply as fragments and isolated portions; those who are more finely organized, or born in a happier age, may recognize them as episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.

The passages chosen for consideration in this chapter represent Shelley's nearest approach to a final solution of the problem of art and morals. Possibly their author did not himself appreciate the penetration of the judgements, sometimes only implicit in simile and metaphor, which they contain; for he takes a hesitant leave of the question and, in later paragraphs, modifies some of his views in an unfortunate manner. Such inconsistencies are not a primary difficulty for a study like this one, and some will not even require to be mentioned; it being no part of our task to make a harmonious exposition of Shelley's personal views. But these second thoughts and minor contradictions do make it harder to treat clearly of a subject already complex and elusive and we should like to make a cautious preparation for this last attack upon it by setting forth as plainly as possible certain truths and distinctions, which are fundamental to the philosophy reflected in this essay and will be the ultimate support for every proposition we shall advance. Some of the principles in this rather lengthy introduction may appear at first sight so basic as to require no explanation but, if the reader's experience is ours, he will find that these notions are never so easy to grasp and retain as might be thought, and that failure to absorb them inevitably means confusion and bewilderment in regard to the more complex matters to which they lead.

We distinguish, first, between knowing and acting, or between the speculative and the practical; then, between making and doing, or between art and prudence.<sup>1</sup> The first of these distinctions may be approached by noting that reason can function in either of two ways. According to one

<sup>1</sup> Our explanation of these distinctions and of their consequences is drawn from the following writings of St. THOMAS: *Quaestiones disputatae de Veritate*, q.5, a.1; *Ia IIae*, q.56, a.3, c.; *ibid.* q.57, a.4 and a.5; q.58, a.5, ad 2.

mode of action, the intellect merely seeks to know, that is, to apprehend an order in things which is not of its doing; so that by this activity are generated all those sciences called speculative, meaning the branches of philosophy and natural science where a knowledge of reality is pursued simply for its own sake. According to the other mode of operation, the intellect is not content merely to apprehend the causes of a certain state of things; in view of a good to be attained or realised, it seeks to alter some condition, not merely to apprehend order, but to set in order, to build an order of its own. Reason, operating in this fashion, is called practical, and gives rise to all the activities of man whereby he seeks to improve himself or the world about him. It is important to note that this work of the intellect is a directing, having for its object the attainment of a good which is drawing the appetite. Reason has passed a judgement of approval upon this end and is presenting it as desirable.

Now, of these two primary divisions of mental activity, it is clear that art belongs to the second, as being an attempt to make or change an order, not merely to know one, nor even, primarily, to communicate one unchanged. To think of poetry, therefore, as essentially a means of achieving new knowledge is simply to confuse the practical with the speculative, or poetry with science. The exact inter-relations of these two, and the consequences of that erroneous confusion will be studied in the next chapter.

The distinction which bears upon the question of art and morality is, of course, the second, that between making and doing. Just as all the practical operations of the mind are radically different from the speculative, so, among the practical activities themselves, it is impossible not to see a second radical division. In the one instance, the order which the practical reason sets up lies in an external work and the action is consequently transitive; in the other, the order is set in the acts of the agent himself, so that both the work and the labor of its production are immanent. As in all operation of a practical nature, the intellect, in both cases, will move under the impulse of desire; but, from this viewpoint, a second great difference is to be seen, for, in the first case, which is that of art, the order pursued is desired for itself; in the second, that of prudence, the course of action which constitutes the objective is desired by the agent as what is best for him.<sup>1</sup>

Although the reason of the difference is so simple, we must observe carefully why, in art, the end is sought for its own sake, whereas, in moral conduct, the goal pursued is the improvement of self. The reason is that,

<sup>1</sup> A possible difficulty is that, in certain arts, the work pursued does not seem outside the agent at all, as is the case with music, poetry, and the so-called liberal arts. But, if such works of art are admittedly not distinct from the agent in the sense of being physically outside him, like those of sculpture or painting, it is surely clear that they are yet, in a profound sense, detached from him; the artist, in these cases, is like an artisan who would be content to form his tool or machine only in his head, so to speak; the difference between poet and artisan simply being this, that, in the case of the latter, the product remains incomplete until externalised, whereas in the former it is of so elevated and intelligible a nature that it cannot be externalised in the physical sense at all.



in the first case, the objective is a work outside of, or independent of, the agent which does not involve his person nor have any direct bearing on his self-interest, so that, if desired at all, it must be desired for itself alone; while, in the second case, since the actions proposed do not aim at an external result except incidentally, their nature is to involve the agent himself and, as a result, to be esteemed for the good they offer to self.<sup>1</sup>

From the difference just mentioned, a certain far-reaching consequence can at once be drawn. Although both art and prudence, as belonging in the domain of the practical, presuppose desire of some sort, a work of art will be far less influenced by desire than a work of prudence. Because of its detachment from himself, the artist, albeit he would never make anything whatever unless he desired it, will hardly dream of making his work in such or such a fashion merely because he wishes it so, but rather because it is good for the work in itself to be so. Moral conduct, on the other hand, is to a far greater degree at the mercy of appetite; a man, although he may know very well what is best, will not do what is best unless he also desires it, with the result that, if his appetite is depraved, he will be unable to alter his life in accordance with his better judgement. In art, therefore, the intellect enjoys a certain domination which it lacks in prudence, for the reason already noted that the right artistic decision costs appetite nothing, there being no sacrifice of self-interest involved. No painful self-discipline is required of him who would compose a poem or picture in praise of temperance; the temperance he is aiming at lies outside himself in the poem or picture, and to desire a virtue in that form is an easy matter. To summarise the results of our comparison of moral and artistic activity: in moral activity, desire is in almost complete control, for self is compromised at every step and the bent of appetite is helping to determine each choice; in art, desire counts for far less, the agent being free to do what the creative judgement prescribes, since a choice in obedience to this judgement will do no violence to his desires.

If reason is made the basis of comparison, the roles are of course reversed. In the realm of art, intellect is dominant, so that it is far more impor-

<sup>1</sup> Lest the phrase, "the good they offer to self," be misunderstood, — it may be well to recall that we are speaking here of the *prudent* man, who, being truly virtuous, is able to avoid the false good of self-indulgence and to seek what is truly good for him. This good lies not in skill in accomplishment, nor even in accomplishment itself, but within the agent himself, in the desire and resolve to do the right. When a man leaps into a stream to save someone from drowning, the excellence of his act, as a moral act, does not result from the grace with which he swims, nor on the achievement of a successful rescue; as a moral agent, he achieved all he set out to do as soon as he did his best.

A parallel comment may be made to the proposition that the work of art is desired for itself alone. While it is obviously true that the end which the artist pursues is not an ulterior good but the good of his work, there is nothing in this to prevent that work from serving a further good. In other words, insistence on the peculiar detachment of the creative imagination should not incline us to doubt that, of their nature, all its products are directed to human ends. St. Thomas makes an exceedingly positive statement along this line: *Item considerandum est quod nos utimur omnibus quae sunt secundum artem facta, sicut propter nos existentibus. Nos enim sumus quodammodo finis omnium artificialium.*—In *II Physicorum*, lect.4, n.8. This is true beyond controversy for the useful arts, of course, but no less so for the fine arts, when it is recalled that the result of these is the image, a thing not merely without value but without meaning for other than rational beings.



tant that an artist should know what is best than that he should actually pursue what is best; goodwill is no substitute for ignorance, and a well-meaning blunder is far less excusable than a deliberate and conscious refusal to make the work as good as it could be made. Whereas, in the domain of prudence, the right judgement of intellect is itself dependent upon the previous disposition of appetite; with the result that speculative judgement is of far less consequence, a quite general knowledge of what is right being sufficient, and the order of good conduct standing firm in spite of mistakes, so long as these are not voluntary and therefore proof of a wrong appetite.

The fundamental distinction between the operations of prudence as intransitive and those of art as transitive, permits another comparison between the two powers, this time regarding the necessity of their exercise. Prudence must be exercised or it simply does not exist; art may be used or not without violating its nature. The man who engages himself to be virtuous only on certain days of the week is obviously not a prudent man and, if it be asked why not, the answer is that, first of all, he cannot abstain from acts which fall under the guidance of reason working with the good life as objective, for these are practically synonymous with human life; and secondly, unless he is consistently willing that such acts be submitted to reason, he simply lacks that rational control of his conduct which we call the virtue of prudence. There is thus no possibility of a vacation from moral virtue, but a vacation from art, or even a spell of wilful dissipation of its powers, is quite compatible with this latter virtue; for here the acts concerned, being aimed, not at the fulfilment of human nature itself, but merely at the making of a particular object, may be avoided entirely without crime against art; and, further, since a right order in artistic activity depends so much more on knowing what is right than on desiring what is right, wilfully perpetrated monstrosities, no matter how numerous, can never justify the conclusion that their author could not do good work if he chose, or, in other words, that he does not possess the virtue of art. To express the matter a little differently, although in both art and prudence the general principle holds that a practical end dictates what steps are to be taken in order to reach it; in the case of prudence the end is imposed upon us by the requirements of our human nature; whereas, in art, the end is a matter of free choice. It follows that the necessity which reigns in moral life is absolute, as far as the end is concerned; while that which characterises the domain of art is only conditional — if a given work is decided upon, certain measures will be necessary in order to bring it about.

No man can escape the obligation to use prudence, that is, to live from day to day as best he knows how; and the relentless demands of this virtue invite a further comparison with art in view of their respective jurisdictions. It is clear that, in this regard, the competence of art is strictly limited, as confined to a definite sphere of human activity and subject to prudence even there. The rule of prudence, embracing all conscious and wilful acts, must reach into every studio and workshop; for the artist, although under no obligation to work at his art, is engaged in a human act when he does so;

it is out of the question that he should ever be able to put off his humanity or its responsibilities; so that, in his work, as in everything else, he must heed the admonitions of his own prudential reason, as well as those of the prudential reason of the community.<sup>1</sup> There will be little hesitation in accepting this principle for the useful arts: house-builders, engineers and the like must obviously neither permit themselves, nor be permitted, to construct that which is dangerous or unserviceable. But there is a certain reluctance to apply it to the fine arts, one understandable reason being that these approach so much nearer to the intellectual and speculative. Nobody has any business telling a scientist how to go about his investigations or proofs, which are to be worked out according to inherent principles and laws not subject to change or interference. By what right do we deny the same immunity to the artist? And the fact is that from a strictly artistic standpoint, the artist seems subject to a power as tyrannical in its way as those laws of truth which force humility upon the philosopher and scientist. It need only be recalled that the end pursued by the former, once it has been selected, is particular and fixed, and that this fixity must communicate itself to the means.<sup>2</sup> Hence the sense of inevitability always associated with good art, the feeling that the end achieved could have been achieved by no other means than these. Hence too, both the triumphant ease of some artists and the painful search for the exact word or stroke on the part of others. Only the man who has conceived the end can possibly know how it is to be attained; the artist never falters or hesitates like a doctor unable to decide which of many symptoms is really significant; if he is obliged to search, it is rather like a man who has lost something he will be able to recognise in a moment as soon as he finds it, or like someone trying the many pieces of a puzzle with the picture of the correct result clearly in mind. It would seem he cannot profit by laws or rules, except in the most general sense, nor even by the friendliest advice.<sup>3</sup>

These aspects of their work have led some artists into the absurd position of conscious indifference to the needs and purposes of society represented by the image of the ivory tower. But the simple fact is that there is no way in which a man can cease being a man, or escape from the duty of living according to his human nature. Cut off from the community, his existence will be incomplete and unnatural; united with the community, he must share in its work or become a contemptible parasite. The muddled popular mind, while it never questions the right of the community, in time of emergency, to close up studio, theatre, and even university, in the interest of the general good, is at the same time much too tolerant of the loud demands made by some artistic groups for complete liberty of action. If

<sup>1</sup> Cf. ST. THOMAS, *In I Ethicorum*, lect.2.

<sup>2</sup> This determination arises only after the end has been chosen, of course; until then there is no fixed way in which an artist must proceed, except in so far as the properties of his medium may limit his choice of an end. How many ways are there of painting a given landscape? The answer is, an indefinite number. But once a given rendering has been conceived, there will be only one way to make that particular picture.

<sup>3</sup> MARITAIN, *op. cit.*, *Discours sur l'art*, p.191; see also p.196.

this question is squarely faced, it must be clear that there is no escape from prudence, neither for the scientist nor, *a fortiori*, for the artist. The man of science, working in the speculative order, obviously cannot be advised as to what he should accomplish, since that is a matter beyond his control. But although it is manifestly unreasonable to admonish a mathematician as to what he should conclude concerning the triangle, it is not unreasonable to advise him as to whether or not in given circumstances he should study or teach his geometry. The use of a speculative science is free, but the manner of that use and the result of it are not free; so that under one aspect only science is definitely subject to prudence. Now, in the case of art, the agent clearly has more freedom than in science, and this is most obvious in the useful arts. We do not have much patience with the housebuilder who protests the necessity of his art in defence of some gross inconvenience or waste in his building. Not only was he free in taking the contract, but also in the execution of it, and we may fairly hold him to account for any wilful imperfections. In the fine arts, to be sure, this principle that the artist is free both in the use of his art and in the actual execution of any given task, is not so manifest. The poet, for example, works under a certain necessity not experienced by the mere artisan and resembling that which dictates the course of the man of science. But the crucial difference between fine art and science is that the artistic necessity arises, not merely upon the poet's taking up his pen and beginning to write, but upon his additional choice of an artistic objective or end. It is the difference between the physiologist deciding to investigate the effects of alcohol upon the nervous system and the poet resolving to compose a poem on wine. Once launched upon his research, the scientist has no longer any choice but to investigate the truth of the matter, whatever it may be; the poet, even after his initial choice of the theme, has the further possible alternatives of praising this beverage, or cursing it, or of taking some less forthright attitude, and he must also choose, out of an indefinite multitude, images suited to his purpose. Every instance of necessity in a work of art follows in this way upon some free choice by its author and, since prudence will permit no man to freely choose what is contrary to his own good or to that of the community, artistic necessity can never be an excuse for evading the requirements of the more absolute virtue.

Of course, all we have done up to the present is to show that the artist, as a man, is as much obliged to do the right as any other man; we have not shown that works of art which do violate moral principles are in any way inferior, as works of art, to those which are completely edifying. But is it true that a dangerously immoral composition, other things being equal, can be as excellent by artistic standards as that which serves a high and noble theme? After all we have done to maintain an irreducible difference between art and prudence, it may surprise the reader to be told that we think not. It is impossible that the artist, as artist, should be under direct obedience to the commands of prudence, yet we think it can be shown from the nature, not of prudence, but of art itself, that the artist has an obligation to respect the truth which carries with it an obligation

to respect the right. This is a question which it will be better to postpone for a few pages until the context of Shelley's essay presents us with the proper occasion for it.

A last observation may be offered regarding the relation of these two virtues to the person. No excellence in art, nor fidelity in its exercise, will ever permit a man, obviously, to be called good in his own person; it is not the artist himself which the virtue of art sets in order. The action of prudence, on the other hand, is perfective of the agent; in proportion as it takes effect he will deserve to be called a good man.

With these basic principles for guidance, let us see what further light may be drawn from the remarks of one great poet concerning the obligations of art towards prudence. The first of the passages from Shelley chosen for consideration in this chapter, while it still fails to come to grips with the worst difficulty, does make a statement confirming the principle that the nature of art prohibits an absolute freedom in the choice of subject, and offers besides one or two observations helpful to the understanding of the general theory of imitation.

"In periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay." The word *sympathizes* does not commit the poet to any clear position, but the meaning of the phrase would seem to be that the poets of a period degenerate in morals, being almost inevitably infected with the spirit of their age, will produce poor art, although nothing has yet been said to explain why the moral imperfections of an artist should have anything to do with the artistic excellence of his work. It is also uncertain what Shelley means by decadent art. The context of the discussion, which concerns the influence of the drama on social morality, would lead one to expect that decadent art should signify work corrupt by moral standards, that is to say which presents moral evil as attractive or at least indifferent; and it is therefore surprising to find that what he seems to have in mind is simply false and uninspired art. The drama of a corrupt society is described merely as "cold imitations of the forms of the great masterpieces of antiquity," "or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines which the writer considers as moral truths," or simply as political propaganda. In the last sentence, however, obscenity is spoken of as becoming, "from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting," as if a reference was implied to plays immoral in the sense mentioned above, as attempting to disguise vice under a cloak of elegance. Needless to say, this last type of objectionable art is the only one relevant to his purpose, although Shelley will treat of it only in the final paragraph of the three printed at the head of this chapter. There is not much point in considering the effect on society of compositions which are mere preaching or mere pornography, since these are not works of art at all.

But in the phrase already cited a step forward is taken, for it makes clear that in our poet's opinion an artist's subject is important, along with his sincerity and skill. He will have none of your "weak attempts to



teach doctrines which the writer considers moral truths, and which are usually no more than specious flatteries. . . ." Of course, there is a two-fold criticism in this phrase: the inferior work being condemned because it is "weak," that is, lacking in true imaginative power, as well as because it represents the choice of a bad principle or purpose; its weakness could arise from the mere fact that the end which it pursues is ulterior, regardless of the goodness or badness of that end. Nevertheless, it is clear that Shelley feels there is real advantage for the artist in securing a genuine moral truth for his subject, one to which the spirit of the imagination will consent to "be made subservient." The unworthy subject, we may agree with him in thinking, can never attract or arouse the creative power to the same degree, because it will not be susceptible of receiving a form capable of exciting genuine sentiment and passion, but merely one that pretends to true emotion while in fact appealing to caprice and appetite. It is hardly likely that a poem expressing as good that which intelligence knows to be evil will succeed in winning the profound assent of mind and heart that is readily granted to great art; a superficial and probably irrational pleasure is the most to be expected from it; although this is a point Shelley seems to overlook in his defence of the poetry of the ancient Sicilian and Alexandrian schools which is soon to follow.

When a work of art is expressive of manifest falsehood, or turned to an end ulterior to its own nature, it becomes devoid of imagination and pervaded by the "calculating principle." In the first case, the difficulty of achieving a natural integrity with the unpoetic and hostile elements of the improper subject invites an attempt at counterfeit: normal experience is being violated, healthy and natural inclinations are being suppressed or carried too far, and hence the poet will be driven to persuade himself and others by the conscious devices of rhetoric. When his purpose is extrinsic to his art, there is again a desertion of the true principle of imitation, the artistic effect of such works (in the words of an earlier paragraph) being "diminished to the exact degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose." Any work of art is effective in proportion as it causes the peculiar sort of pleasure characteristic of art. This special pleasure, the natural effect of the image, comprises, we may recall, an intellectual aspect, consisting in the gratification of knowledge through the image, with all the advantages this mode of learning offers to intellect alone; and a sensuous aspect, in the peculiar charm of an object whose sensible properties support and enhance its intelligibility. Now, in proportion as an end ulterior to the image becomes obvious, the attention shifts to that end, the image loses force, and the manner of knowing approaches the conceptual. At the same time, the harmony of sensuous and intelligible elements characteristic of the true image must vanish because the mind is being directed to a reality of necessity either merely sensuous — an example might be a poster advertising a food — and thus offering little significance for intellect; or merely intelligible, as in versified moral philosophy, and hence holding small charm for sense. A true poet will persuade by poetic means, his work creating its own pleasure and having no need of

the super-added attraction of a moral or sensuous good; the pleasure of poetry is itself poetic and neither a pleasure of physical satisfaction nor one of moral edification.

The poets representative of the declining culture of ancient Greece receive a more thorough and penetrating consideration from Shelley, because, as genuine artists producing work of undoubted artistic excellence which yet reflects a dangerous immorality, they offer the best of all grounds to those who would argue that poetry may indeed contribute to the destruction of social life. Again it will be remarked that when Shelley exposes a problem in images — his natural language — the power and subtlety of his analysis are almost uncanny; but when he turns to the defence of an opinion more logical and theoretical in character, he seems to falter and grow inconsistent. He can feel his way to the truth by poetic means, but to win the same truth through deliberate reasoning would require of him an unfeeling detachment, and submission to cold fact, repugnant to the poetic mind.

Seizing immediately upon that feature of the Sicilian poetry which is the surest guide to its essential shortcomings, he describes it as being "intensely melodious." But this siren music, although irresistible in charm, is inclined to "overcome and sicken the spirit with excess of sweetness." In a lovely simile paying tribute to the higher and truer art of an earlier day, he explains the difference between the effect on the senses of the best, as opposed to that of inferior, art: true poetry is "as a meadow-gale of June, which mingles the fragrance of all the flowers of the field, and adds a quickening and harmonizing spirit of its own which endows the sense with a power of sustaining its extreme delight." Passing over, for the moment, the phrases of this image which condemn the narrow exclusiveness of the inferior poets, who render the heavy perfume of a single flower, rather than the mingled fragrance which stands for the whole of nature, it may be noted that the more excellent art adds a new vitality to its sensuous elements in harmonising them by wedding them to an intelligible cause. The result is that sense pleasure is raised above the animal level, where it is merely a fleeting delirium, and is truly humanised; it will now vanquish its own nature in becoming permanent, a joy for the entire being and one which can never fade. The true poem "endows the sense with the power of sustaining," not of merely enduring, but of retaining a lasting hold on its delight. The figures in that art-world on the sides of the Grecian urn enjoyed this privilege:

more happy, happy love!  
For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,  
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

But the writings of the Sicilian school, although they lacked nothing that the musical gifts of their authors could confer upon them, and although

the latter are acknowledged as true representatives of the "creative faculty of Greece," are condemned for a "want of harmony." By drawing a contrast with Homer and Sophocles, Shelley explains the reason for this judgement. The superiority of the greater poets "consists in the presence of those thoughts which belong to the inner faculties of our nature, not in the absence of those which are connected with the external; their incomparable perfection consists in a harmony of the union of all."

Now, it is essential to note that Shelley's criticism is not ethical; it is artistic. He is seeking to determine, not the moral, but the artistic, value, of these works; and this he does by comparing them with the best.<sup>1</sup> His conclusion is not that the Sicilians are the equal of the poets of the earlier age as artists, although their inferiors from a moral viewpoint; but rather that, failing to appeal to more than sense, they must be considered to have fallen short of their rivals even as artists. But upon what grounds shall we forbid a poet, as poet, to address himself to only one half of our nature if he chooses? Since prudence and art are quite distinct, there should be no escape from the proposition that goodwill counts for everything in morals and for nothing in art; so that the moral man may be excused any mistake, so long as he desires the right, and the artist be permitted to choose any end, so long as he acts well, that is, effectively, in the achievement of it. Common sense knows better of course: we hardly think of a well-meaning blunderer as a fine example of prudence, nor do we consider a man to be a great artist who exercises a true gift of imagination upon worthless or ignoble themes. It is not enough that the artist should have the skill to attain any end he happens to desire, he must desire a right and proper end.

What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet. Vainly will the latter imagine that he has everything in his own power; that he can make an intrinsically inferior action equally delightful with a more excellent one by his treatment of it; he may indeed compel us to admire his skill, but his work will possess, within itself, an incurable defect.<sup>2</sup>

That this judgement represents the normal opinion of mankind is borne out by the fact that the centuries have granted the highest rank among the classics only to works which are faithful to the principle upon which it rests. Our business is to explain why it is true and so far we have done little to this end. We have indeed insisted that the artist may not consider himself an angelic guest in the household of man, to be paid all honor and reverence but never to be expected to concern himself with the affairs of daily life. But this claim that the artist is the subject of prudence, with the same duty towards the community as anyone else, considers the artist as man and citizen, not as artist. If this were all that could be said on the relationship of art to morals, it would remain true that a poet offending against morals in his work would be guilty of no offence against art

<sup>1</sup> Sound tactics; to judge anything we must always take the highest and purest form of it as our standard. This is to be truly objective and scientific. The normal specimen, that is, the specimen as perfect as nature intended it to be, measures all the rest.

<sup>2</sup> MATTHEW ARNOLD, *The Choice of Subjects in Poetry*.

itself; an immoral play or poem might deserve the same admiration on purely artistic grounds as a work of equal genius expressing genuine moral truth, and Arnold's doctrine would be false.

A natural temptation, and one to which a good many moralising critics have succumbed, would lead us to solve the problem by maintaining that poetry is directly subordinate to human good, with the result that the poet who attacks the moral life of man betrays the nature of his art, just as the military leader in revolt may be said to betray the nature of his vocation, which is to defend his country rather than to attack her. Unfortunately, the comparison is not valid: the calculations and strategy of the army commander are already prudential, not artistic, and the immoral poet is better likened to a skilful doctor, who avails himself of his art to commit a murder, and who must be admitted to retain the art of medicine unimpaired, however wickedly he may misdirect it. All art is a making, not a doing, and is definitely outside the domain of conduct; this is the first reason which obliges us to refrain from denying all value to a work of art because it lacks moral value.

Still another reason for rejecting a puritanical attitude may be drawn from the consideration of the nature of the fine arts as opposed to the useful, but this second reason, oddly enough, is at the same time the foundation of that true obligation to respect morality from which the fine arts cannot escape. Since the nature of art is to be a making, it follows that the purer and more primary form of art must be useful art. Now art has a tendency to become more than a mere craft by raising itself to a higher plane. The thing to notice is the direction of this movement; it is towards the more and more intellectual. There is no tendency in art to become prudential, but a real tendency to approach the scientific or speculative. Exactly what is meant by this will be explained at length in our next chapter;<sup>1</sup> for the present, let us seek the simplest language possible and repeat that the advance from useful art to fine art is an advance towards more and more meaning. The difference between the two lies in the fact that fine art creates an image; and an image, unlike a product of carpentry or engineering, has significance. It may be concluded that when a man is making a tool, or machine, or anything purely useful, he is under the single obligation of making it well; but when a man is making an image, he must make it, not merely with skill, but with fidelity; — the image is by nature expression and must express the truth. So we see that, whereas art can in no sense be drawn into an affinity with prudence, it does by nature pursue an affinity with science. The fine arts actually have power to teach; they are doctrinal after their own fashion; and it follows that if the poet has any obligation beyond that of making a thing well, it is not an obligation to serve the good, but to serve the truth. This is a brief statement, we repeat, of a principle to be more fully explained and defended later, but which we must beg the reader to accept for the moment in order that this discussion may proceed.

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 236-238, 246-248.



A final conclusion stands as the climax of our entire argument. This very tendency of fine art to become speculative rather than prudential, or to serve the truth rather than the good, if it exempts the artist from any direct obligation to observe the moral law in his work, at the same time imposes upon him a very real, if indirect, obligation towards it. It is the nature of the image to tell us something and therefore it should tell us the truth, — not in precisely the sense in which a scientific statement must do so, but yet in a real sense. Now an image true to human nature is one which expresses the nature of a moral being. "The actions . . . of intelligent and ethical beings," in Shelley's words, constitute the poet's subject, and this means the actions of creatures by nature subject to prudence. Here at last we have uncovered the basic principle which guided Arnold in the passage quoted above, and has guided every sensible critic in his judgement of works of art. It does not matter whether the poet is himself prudent, he must know what prudence requires of men; he need not live according to true moral standards, but his work is defective if it reveals that he does not know what they are.

That it should be possible for an artist to achieve an intelligible image of human nature without some true knowledge, speculative as well as experimental, of his subject is surely out of the question. A work revealing conceptions of human life which are patently erroneous is proof of the poor artist. This we are admitting when we dismiss as bad art that which reveals falsehood or improbability in character, passion or motivation; and the principle so easily accepted in psychological matters must be accepted as well for the moral aspects of man's being. Certain ends are determined for the artist by nature; among these are the fundamental principles of moral life, facts which he is as much bound to acknowledge as that there are two sexes, and which impose themselves upon him with a rigor like that exerted by the conditions of his material medium. It may not always be easy to decide whether a given precept really belongs among those "eternal truths characterized upon the imaginations of men" which Shelley himself in a later passage insists no writer dare deface; but even one or two incontrovertible examples would be enough to establish our doctrine, and it may be asserted without hesitation that the artist who presents murder, incest, or great crimes of cruelty or injustice, as good or indifferent acts, is an exceedingly sorry artist whose reconstruction of life is bound to be unconvincing. The poetic power is admittedly amoral, in the sense that the imagination can be set to any sort of work; but to conclude that it does not matter to what sort of work it is set will be to make poetry comparable to deceitful rhetoric, or completely to sever its relation to truth and to reduce it to a mere craft. Now it is only in an improper sense that rhetoric is called good which cleverly and effectively persuades men that the false is true; for nothing can be truly good which betrays the highest power of human nature. If poetry, then, might violate truth without injury to itself, it could only be that the two, poetry and truth, had no more in common than carpentry and truth. But it has been already shown that no product of a fine art can be admired as a piece of good handiwork

merely; a poem is indeed the product of craftsmanship, but is essentially different from a house or machine for the simple reason that it is an image, and the image, of its very nature, says something. When what it says is false, it offends against the truth and violates its own nature. Moral truth demands its respect as much as any other.

How shall we interpret, then, Shelley's comment on the source of the unbalance he sees in the Sicilian poets? "Nor is it the poetical faculty itself, or any misapplication of it, to which this want of harmony is to be imputed." If by the poetical faculty is meant that faculty in its purest form, then from all that has been said, it would appear that Shelley is perfectly right. Had the truest and highest measure of the poetical faculty been present in these erotic poets, they would never have chosen the originals which they did choose. They did not lack morals so much as art. "It is not what the erotic poets have, but what they have not, in which their imperfection consists. It is not inasmuch as they were poets, but inasmuch as they were not poets, that they can be considered with any plausibility as connected with the corruption of their age."

It might be expected that, after having conceded that the artistic inferiority of the Sicilians sprang from a violation of moral truth, Shelley would feel obliged to conclude that work like theirs, making a fatal exclusion of the intellectual and spiritual, could be connected with more than plausibility with the corruption of their age. On the contrary, he continues to defend them and to insist that their verses did no harm, but his arguments are neither clear, nor, even when given the most favorable interpretation possible, very compelling. It should be observed that the question we are now facing is a new one and also that the answer to it is perhaps not quite so obvious as might appear at first glance. Granted a poem is artistically inferior when it misrepresents some great moral principle, why need it be considered a dangerous thing to read? If such a composition does harm, in what way is the harm done?

Shelley's first plea is that the erotic poets had sensibility of a kind, and better any sensibility than none. In them, poetry was making a last resistance to the advancing decay of society; "for the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure; and, therefore, it is corruption." It is certainly true that the final consequence of debauchery is to destroy the very keenness of sensation which it seeks to satisfy, that "it begins at the imagination and intellect as at the core, and distributes itself thence as a paralysing venom through the affections into the very appetites, until all become a torpid mass in which hardly sense survives." It is also true that, since these poets had an authentic power of art, both they and all who delighted in their work must have remained "less cold, cruel, and sensual than the remnant of their tribe," for they would still retain a truly human power of sensation, that is, one not yet divorced completely from reason. But whether it can be argued that the kind of art under discussion can rightly be held to have arrested the process of moral degeneration is a very different matter. To be sure, in the midst of a brutish popula-

tion, an artist who would offer the highest type of pleasure would be ignored and therefore might be obliged to do little more than yield the public what it wanted in a refined form, — "at the approach of such a period, poetry ever addresses itself to those faculties which are the last to be destroyed." But it is hard to see how the use of the poetic image to express mere sensuality, even though it may cause some intellectual delight as an image, can fail to confirm and encourage the public taste for evil and therefore to deserve the judgement passed by Shelley himself on the Restoration dramatists: "Obscenity . . . becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active, if less disgusting."

So many writers on the moral effects of art seem to think there is no mean between an evangelical position, like that of Ruskin and Tolstoy, according to which an immoral poem can never be a true poem, and the aestheticist position represented by the phrase 'Art for Art's sake,' that it may be well to expose in greater detail our view as to how poetry can exert a moral influence. Glancing back at the basic doctrine of imitation, we may recall that the image derives its peculiar power, first, from its nature as expression, whereby it conveys the original without being that original; and, secondly, from its perfect fusion of the sensuous and intelligible, whereby it becomes the object of knowledge above all others suited to the human mind. By reason of the living unity of the image, it is really not possible, in any analysis of its moral effects, to keep these two aspects clearly separate, but we will do our best to make them serve as the means of imposing some sort of order upon the remarks which follow.

Shelley's stubborn conviction that true art, upon whatever sort of subject it be exercised, can do no mischief, is not entirely mistaken, for no authentic image, as we will try to show, can be primarily a stimulus of desire. The poet himself, even when at work upon an immoral subject, must enjoy the contemplative detachment of a maker — otherwise he would proceed to a deed, rather than to a work — and his poem will have the power of provoking the same attitude in us. The Abbé Brémond makes the fine remark that, whenever we read a true poet, the first thing we catch, even before his meaning, is *«l'état d'âme qui l'a fait poète»*; we join the artist in taking a poetic view of the subject and, so long as we are taking such a view, shall feel, of course, no inclination to action. Hence it is probably true to say that, as desire counts for far less than knowledge in the making of a poem, so it will count for far less in the reading of it. We may see more easily still how a work of art cannot possibly have a direct and immediate impact upon conduct if we consider its detachment, not from the artist and spectator, but from the original of which it is the expression. The pleasure excited by the image is always a pleasure in the image itself, not in that from which it proceeds; the act to which direct incitement is made is an act of contemplation, not of crime. Even of a sensual image it may be said, not merely that it appeals to the intellect, but that, even in its appeal to the senses, it arouses them as powers of knowing, not of desiring. A certain desire must be present, of course; however, it has for object not the actual seizure of the original, but an especially

delightful mode of knowing it. We may contemplate with delight an image of drunkenness without contemplating getting drunk; or an image of sobriety, without the smallest wish to be sober.<sup>1</sup> In short, that self-sufficiency arising from its nature as an image which explains the great power of poetry, becomes, when viewed from another angle, the explanation of its ineffectiveness. As proceeding from a good or evil original, from which it distracts our attention as the decoy distracts attention from the fowler, it will be a thing of profit or peril; as the mere embodied significance of that original, it will be possible to take delight in it without desiring the original. Chastity or temperance, desired in the form of pictures and plays, will not entail the pursuit of those virtues; nor will licentiousness or drunkenness, desired in similar images, necessarily entail the moral downfall of the spectators who enjoy them.

This gulf between image and original is probably what has led our poet to feel that no genuine art can contribute to social decay, while it has led others, less clear-sighted, to argue that it does not matter at all what sort of theme the artist chooses. These last would maintain that the image of a wicked original is likely to lead people to pursue the original only in the case of the vulgar or immature, who are unable to make the necessary distinction, and will hiss the actor who played the role of the villain even when they meet him in the street. Now, while it is quite true that a great part of the public, principally because the sensuous side of art has more power over them than the intellectual, are indeed inclined to esteem every image rather for the renewed contact it offers with the original than for itself, so much so as to make necessary sometimes the censor's prohibition of works irreproachable artistically, (Shelley's own tragedy might be an example), that is not at all the basis upon which our criticism of the erotic poets would be founded. Even if it be granted that the image speaks for itself, that it is a thing to be contemplated rather than pursued, that all it asks for is a temporary "suspension of disbelief," it remains an expression of the most fascinating and powerful kind and, in the case of these decadent artists, the expression of a deadly falsehood.

Directly confronted with the original, we would be able to recognise and deal with it in a moment. That is why artistic excellence, far from being an excuse for an immoral poem, is actually what makes it more dangerous than compositions which are not true images but serve obvious ulterior ends. Works of propaganda, devoid of true art, make scant concealment for their author and his intentions; we detect in a moment what he is about and offer an instinctive resistance. The creations of poetry, on the other hand, are like natural wonders, attracting by their own life and beauty. When they present an evil original as the object of detestation which it should be, no one can deny their power for good. When they misrepresent

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Ia*, q.5, a.4, ad 1: ... *Bonum proprie respicit appetitum; est enim bonum, quod omnia appetunt; et ideo habet rationem finis, nam appetitus est quasi quidam motus ad rem. Pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam: pulchra enim dicuntur, quae visa placent; unde pulchrum in debita proportionem consistit; quia sensus delectantur in rebus debite proportionatis, sicut in sibi similibus, nam et sensus ratio quaedam est; et omnis virtus cognoscitiva.*



and disguise it, the only supposition upon which they might be considered to have no power for evil would be that of the existence of perfect prudence in the spectator.

The dangerous and beneficent possibilities of the image will become clearer upon considering its relation to intellect and sense. Here we cannot do better than return to the contrast pointed out by Shelley between Homer and Sophocles on the one hand and the Sicilians on the other. In the writings of the former, the subject represents a true balance of the higher and lower elements of human nature, such a subject being the action or actions of "intelligent and ethical beings." Upon the intellect of the spectator, the effect of a successful image of this original will be to make him comprehend, or come nearer to comprehending, not merely the intelligible, but even the sensuous aspects of the subject, — for therein lies the special advantage of knowledge by images, that the action of the mind is one and undivided. Similarly, upon his power of sensation, the good image will impress, not only the sensuous, but also the spiritual or intelligible features of these actions, imparting to these higher qualities a greater force than they could wield through statement in any other form.

In the case of the inferior artists, however, the original is principally or exclusively sensual, — an action of intelligent and ethical beings who, in this instance, are acting contrary to their nature. Again the image will have an impact, not exclusively upon sense, — for then it would be like pornography, a substitute for the original, rather than an expression of it, and no work of art at all — but upon intellect as well. Accordingly, it will not only seek to overwhelm the senses with the charm of the merely sensual, but also to persuade the intellect of the value of the merely sensual. Success in the latter enterprise, since it involves a violation of nature, will be achieved by deceit and by distraction: by specious reasonings, by disguising lower physical elements in highly intelligible or even spiritual images, and by hypnotising the mind through the use of an irresistible music.

Why, be this juice the growth of God, who dare  
 Blaspheme the twisted tendril as a Snare?  
 A Blessing, we should use it, should we not?  
 And if a Curse — why, then, Who set it there?

.....

Ah, with the Grape my fading life provide,  
 And wash the Body whence the Life has died,  
 And lay me, shrouded in the living Leaf,  
 By some not unfrequented Garden-side.

Let the poet go on in this vein, and the Grape (note the effect of the capital letter) can come to arouse an emotion like that which might be inspired by some great, abstract ideal; getting drunk will seem a kind of fulfilment of human destiny; again, the cadence of his exquisite phrases is so delightful that it does not seem to matter much what he is saying. It is impossible not to admire Shelley's penetration in accusing such lovely writing of a "want of harmony"; that is, in fact, its profound defect: the unbalance

of the original communicates itself to the image, of which the general tendency is to draw down the intellectual to the level of the sensual, rather than to blend the two into a perfect harmony.

But again it might be protested that Shelley is unjustified in this condemnation, because the subject of a poem lies outside the poem; the want of harmony complained of in the original has vanished from the image. The crude original would provoke no doubt a base sense pleasure only, but the image of it awakens true poetic pleasure and that rare and precious mood in which all the faculties of the mind function as one, — a mood like that enjoyed by the artist himself at the moment of creation, and which has already been described, when the image was being considered simply as expression, as the power of taking a poetic view. Why should it matter what sort of theme is used to draw the mind into this blessed state? The highest and happiest condition of the soul has been attained, and it is impossible that, while the mind is rejoicing in it, there can be any danger of surrender to the allurements of vice. Shelley himself has said as much:

These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe.

Or else, a more dangerous counter-attack might be made, directed against the use of the terms "subject" or "original." It might be contended that we have no business whatever to speak of the original of a work of fine art, for no such thing exists; if there were such a thing, it should be possible to point to it, to identify it; whereas everyone knows that no proposition, nor any set of propositions, scenes, events, characters or motives can ever be said to constitute that which is expressed by a good poem. Holding up great works of music as the best illustration of their principle, our opponents would claim complete independence for the image and dismiss all attempts to judge a work in relation to a subject-matter which seems separated from it by a purely fictional distinction. Try to think of the subject-matter of Hamlet, they might say, and you will find you have only a mass of incidents, thoughts, and words which make up neither poetry nor history; it is futile to talk about what a poem means; rather it is the test of a true poem, in the words of a modern American poet, that it "should not mean, but be."

All praise is due to this emphasis on the integrity of the image and on the untranslatable nature of its significance; but these features of it must not lure us into a denial of its nature. While an image is an expression drawing its characteristic value from the fact of its separation from that which it expresses, it nevertheless remains the expression of something. To deny this will be to lower art to the level of nature, which it resembles in its mode of generation but not in its essence. The object which a poet makes does not stand in the same category of being as a tree or a bird; it has the nature of a universal, declaring a meaning greater than itself. The fact that the inexpressible quality of this meaning makes it impossible

of accurate formulation in prose, or indeed in any medium other than that which has been employed, must not blind us to the fact of its existence. Adapting some lines of Keats, we may insist that a poet already enjoys the heaven which these promise to the nightingale, and sings

Not a senseless trancèd thing,  
But divine melodious truth;  
Philosophic numbers smooth;  
Tales and golden histories  
Of heaven and its mysteries.

In order to prove that a piece of fine poetry is more than a "senseless trancèd thing," a mere outburst of feeling, we are not obliged to invite derision by attempting a clumsy approximation of its meaning in prose; it is a sufficient description to say that the subject is that which the artist proposes to himself as his objective, or that which he intends to convey; a desire for greater precision than this would only prove our incomprehension of the nature of the image. At the same time, the fact that a prose paraphrase does catch something of the significance of a poem justifies an employment of it by science something like the use that is made of diagrams of living things in biology and permits us to advise the reader that such a paraphrase may be taken as a good enough indication of what is meant by subject and original.

In so far as a work of art does express an original, it can be true or false, good or evil; and, though the work is emancipated from the conditions of the original, it would be absurd to think it could be quite unaffected by that which it expresses. In the case before us, where the original is purely sensual, the image will no doubt appeal to the whole man; but it will be an appeal tempting him to forget his wholeness and to surrender both higher and lower faculties to the enjoyment of the expression of that which is suited only to the lower. In order to induce man thus to go counter to his true nature, art must in some measure betray its own nature; hence the trickery, the false imagery, and the disproportionate role of sound and rhythm in decadent poetry (upon which comment has been already made) in view of which Shelley refuses to rank the Sicilian writers with the highest. Their work will share in the nature of the image sufficiently to appeal to both sense and spirit, but not sufficiently to bring about a balance of the higher and lower faculties as perfect as that achieved by better art; the mood which the inferior work calls up will always tend to be dominantly sensuous. Now, if it be recalled that the detachment of the poetic view and the nice adjustment of the mental powers which it implies are unstable conditions, we may ask what will become of the reader, devoted to erotic art, when "in the intervals of inspiration — and they may be frequent without being durable — [he] becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live." Desire, which dominates moral life, will now take control. That desire may be so firmly and habitually bent towards the true good as to remain unshaken by the repeated indulgence in refined but exclusively sensual pleasure which

has been the result of the enjoyment of decadent poets; but, in proportion as goodwill is weak, it is inevitable that the reader will be inclined by such indulgence to surrender the higher faculties to the lower, and to pass from the desire for sense pleasure in an artistic form to the desire for it in any form.

Our general conclusion is that the image has tremendous power as a means of imparting knowledge, and as a means of stimulating the faculties through which knowledge is obtained. On the face of it, there seems little reason why its power could not do harm as easily as it can do good; and, in fact, it may insinuate a falsehood as readily as a truth, or promote discord among our vital powers as easily as harmony. If the citizens of Alexandria who were still able to appreciate the verses of their decadent poets, were not as far along the primrose path as the remnant of their tribe, the poet deserves no credit for it. True, he offered them no crude sensations, but a sense pleasure refined, cultured, acceptable to a delicate taste; true, he may have worked without evil purpose, intent only on his art, on the creating of an instrument of delightful knowledge, valued for itself. But to form the image of such an original, he had to practise misrepresentation, presenting the immoral action as a pure and harmless joy for sense and as a proper and justifiable piece of conduct for reason; and he had to bewitch and intoxicate the mind by sensuous stimulants in order to overcome the resistance of reason. His work finished, the image stands, alluring and lovely, singing itself in the ears of men, remote from the ugly contamination of actual vice, bearing no trace of any harmful intent. St. Thomas had weighed his words well when he said of the poet, *seducit per imagines*; the seducer casts a lure in our path, while concealing both himself and his real design. Any immoral artist, however guiltless of deliberate malice, deserves to be considered by society as doing the work of the sorcerer:

I under fair pretence of friendly ends,  
And well plac'd words of glozing courtesy  
Baited with reasons not unpalatable  
Wind me into the easy-hearted man,  
And hug him into snares.

A further question arising from the relation of art to morals, that of the effect of his art upon the artist himself, is noticed by Shelley in certain of the concluding paragraphs of his essay which, because they contain so much that has already received our attention or does not seem to deserve it, have not been printed at the head of this chapter. Having insisted that poetry necessarily inclines its readers to be good, a position we have judged acceptable only when poetry is taken to mean the highest and truest form of it, Shelley seems to think it a natural consequence that the work of composing poetry should make the poet himself good. "A poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men."<sup>1</sup> His appeal to history in support of this claim does

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of poetry as "the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds."



not seem very satisfying, even to himself; but the argument implied in his comments on the peculiarly unselfish quality of the poetic mood, although it cannot win our assent, deserves attention as providing a valuable occasion for studying a little more closely one of the fundamental distinctions with which this discussion was introduced.

The states of soul in which the work of artistic creation goes on are described as "elevating and delightful beyond all expression"; as being "at war with every base desire"; and, in a still stronger phrase, it is asserted that "the enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions; and, whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe."<sup>1</sup> We have already pointed out how the mood associated with the writing or the enjoyment of poetry is contemplative, rather than calculating, and so deserves to be called unselfish. It may also be granted that the contemplative states of the poet are the most absorbing of all, surpassing, in this respect, even those of the speculative thinker. However intense the self-forgetful concentration of the scientist, it cannot equal that of the good artist, who is not searching and groping for scraps of evidence which may point towards a truth, but passionately driving at the realisation of a vision, and of a vision largely made out of his own mind and heart. "The imagination, beholding the beauty of this order, creates it out of itself according to its own idea." However, the unselfishness found in art is quite distinct from the kind of disinterestedness implied by love, virtue, patriotism and so on. The effort and activity of the artist, being so predominantly intellectual, exert almost no influence upon the habitual direction of the will, so that, when the experience of them has passed, the man will be left with the character he had before. Shelley does not seem to appreciate the difference between making and doing: the poet, even if he dips his pen in his own blood, will remain a craftsman, working over an object which stands apart from him; planning an order for something else, not for himself; and his esteem for that order need be just sufficient, in strength and in duration, to enable him to contemplate and express it. Hence the production of a masterpiece of a high moral tone permits us to infer only so much about its author: that he enjoyed the power of beholding the subject in itself, and felt the significance of the thing as profoundly as he understood it. It is of no consequence that, at the moment he is undergoing this deep experience of the elevating subject, he should be untroubled by base desires, for goodness of character does not consist in periods of blessed insight or states of feeling; the author of the edifying work could be justly supposed virtuous in his own person only if the mood necessary to the genesis of his work were clear proof that there existed in him, not merely a power of knowing and feeling, but of efficaciously desiring, the noble ideals of which he can form so compelling an image. That no such inference can be made should be clear enough by now. While we are on the subject, it may be remarked as well that even the artist who does possess true virtue will be in a similar case: however much he may desire to do so, he may find it

<sup>1</sup> All these phrases are from one of the concluding paragraphs of the *Defence*.

impossible to produce a genuine work of art reflecting his deepest convictions, and it would be unfair to require such a work from him as proof of the sincerity of his beliefs. Moral goodness demands the permanent assent of the will, whereas all that art requires is the temporary assent of the whole mind. The virtuous artist will of course refuse to form an image whose significance would be opposed to what he knows to be the true good; but, as an artist, he should have an equal horror of turning out an object which does not result from an authentic poetic mood and which therefore does not achieve a perfect fusion of the emotional and intellectual elements which compose it. Fidelity to this principle would not have prevented the birth of a single great religious work; yet it would have spared Christian society the countless host of dreary moralising verses, hymns, pictures and statues which present religious truth in a repulsive cloak of forced and false emotion.

Shelley himself goes on to a more sensible view, admitting in a text already quoted a few pages back, that the kind of order and harmony which arises at the onset of the creative mood, no matter how frequently that mood may recur, is not permanent and leaves behind it no improved ability to make personal conduct assume a similar order. He even concedes, with what seems great truth, that the man who enjoys such moods, "as he is more delicately organised than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them, . . . will avoid the one and pursue the other with an ardor proportioned to this difference." Or, in other words, the poet, for the incidental reason of his special sensuous endowments, will actually find duty and self-discipline more irksome than the rest of men.

The very last paragraph of the *Defence* offers a fine testimony to the truth of both principles — the subordination of art to truth and hence to moral truth, about which so much has been said already; and the absence of any necessary relation between the moral character of the artist and his work. Having spoken of a great reform in opinion and institution, heralded, as Shelley thinks, by the mighty outburst of the poetical power manifest everywhere in his age, he declares: "The persons in whom this power resides may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with the spirit of good of which they are ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve the power which is seated on the throne of their own soul." The possession of a true gift of art makes a man a minister of the spirit of the good; this is the sound principle, to which Shelley instinctively keeps, that true art cannot be in conflict with true morality. Nor will it matter what are the personal opinions or habits of the man in whom the mysterious power resides; once settled at desk or easel, his gift will insure him producing true art and, in the measure that he produces true art, he will be serving the good.

The deplorable tendency to consider the person of the artist as something of great interest and importance, a tendency which probably took

its rise in Romanticism, has become so widespread in modern times, that it may be well to add a word or two on the supposed opposition between personal and impersonal in art. Statements like the famous one by Wordsworth that poetry "takes its origin in the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," have encouraged a popular assumption that art is simply direct self-expression; while it is forgotten that the same poet described himself as having "at all times endeavored to look steadily at his subject." We have only to understand what is meant by the artist's subject in order to realise, first, how pointless is any contrast drawn between works expressing moods or feelings of the artist himself and, secondly, how undeserving of special notice are such moods and feelings of the artist's own soul. The subject we have already described as that of which the artist seeks to make an image. In the following chapter, it will be shown how this significance, which constitutes the subject of a work of art, demands to be conveyed in the image and in no other form.<sup>1</sup> Now, this very fact of the necessity of the image for its communication is proof that the subject can be neither the real incident of history, nor the true universal of science; that is, neither an object to be exactly described, nor an object to be expressed only in so far as truly understood. What is it then that is urging itself upon the poetic imagination? It is an object to be rendered intelligible at any price; and the price actually exacted will be the sacrifice of conceptual knowledge and the adoption of knowledge by means of the image. So the subject matter of poetry can never be things in themselves, without meaning or value to the human spirit, but rather visions of the mind wherein the real is reconciled with the needs of the imagination. Even works of art which strike us as being supremely objective are merely the expressions of an imagination which can reconcile itself with the actual world more easily and perfectly than most and, hence, unlike the statements of science or history, cannot avoid having something unique and individual about them, — a recognisable style. Since absolutely everything the poet makes is thus in part made out of himself, it is quite irrelevant to the nature of art that the reality entering into his subject should chance to be some mood or emotion of his own. If he is to make art out of his own passions, it is not sufficient that he utter a groan or a sigh, he must express them in an image; and this means surveying them with the impartial eye of the imagination in order to draw them into an integral whole. The poet who would successfully lay bare his own soul will be obliged to practise a detachment more difficult, and no less complete, than if his subject were a broomstick; as a maker, he must forever stand outside what he is doing, dominating the object which is his own heart as if it did not belong to him. Only one subject will lie beyond the reach of his power of contemplation, — that power itself, his own being as a poet. To recall a sentence of Keats already put to use in an earlier chapter: "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity — he is continually in for and filling some other body." There can be no peculiar value attaching to the personal characteristics or opinions of the artist more than to those of men of compar-

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 242-243.

able intelligence or character and, whenever the relations between him and his public are in a healthy state, he will enjoy an undisturbed and contented anonymity.

#### X. POETRY AND SCIENCE

But poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists, on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful. Let us examine, as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by utility. Pleasure or good, in a general sense, is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks, and in which, when found, it acquiesces. There are two kinds of pleasure, one durable, universal, and permanent; the other transitory and particular. Utility may either express the means of producing the former or the latter. In the former sense, whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful. But a narrower meaning may be assigned to the word utility, confining it to express that which banishes the importunity of the wants of our animal nature, the surrounding men with security of life, the dispersing the grosser delusions of superstition, and the conciliating such a degree of mutual forbearance among men as may consist with the motives of personal advantage.

Undoubtedly the promoters of utility, in this limited sense, have their appointed office in society. They follow the footsteps of poets, and copy the sketches of their creations into the book of common life. They make space and give time. Their exertions are of the highest value, so long as they confine their administration of the concerns of the inferior powers of our nature within the limits due to the superior ones. But whilst the sceptic destroys gross superstitions, let him spare to deface, as some of the French writers have defaced, the eternal truths characterised upon the imaginations of men. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines labor, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and of want. They have exemplified the saying, "To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away." The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty.

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense, the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle; tragedy delights by affording a shadow of that pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth." Not that this highest species of pleasure is necessarily linked with pain. The delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry, is often wholly unalloyed.

The production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are poets or poetical philosophers.

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples, in favor of oppressed and deluded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited, had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain. But it exceeds all imagination



to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the ancient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we let "I dare not wait upon I would, like the poor cat in the adage." We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labor, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? From what other cause has it arisen that the discoveries which should have lightened, have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam? Poetry, and the principle of Self of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it.

These paragraphs contain Shelley's earnest convictions as to the dignity and use of poetry, a matter concerning which he has already made occasional remarks but which has been ignored by our commentary until this more lengthy and explicit statement of his views should have been reached. That he should seem so concerned to defend the value of his art may appear strange, since a genuine poet is hardly expected to trouble himself as to whether poetry is worth writing; but his preoccupation is easy to understand if we remember that his essay is a reply to that of Peacock and that it is precisely in this connexion that the latter makes some of his most stinging attacks. The poet's art, according to a typical passage, "can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life a useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts or utilities of life, of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances."

Although the dignity of poetry is so often in his thoughts, Shelley's claim for its supremacy and his defence of that claim are full of contradiction and obscurity. The question is an important one for us and will be given a good deal of space; but, in view of the frequent difficulty of knowing



what he means, less pains will be taken to defend the authenticity of the opinions we shall attribute to Shelley, or to follow closely the progress of his thought through the passages reproduced above. Here, more than elsewhere, his great essay will be the occasion for our own theories, rather than their support or inspiration.

His claim for the supremacy of poetry seems to express itself in two forms:

(a) Poetry, taken apparently in the generic sense, for all activity of the imagination, is directly responsible for every worth-while achievement of the human mind, whether in the fields of art, philosophy, ethics, or even natural science, — an opinion given its most uncompromising form in these words: "poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought..."<sup>1</sup>

(b) Poetry, this time in a restricted sense, probably as signifying the fine arts, is a vital stimulus, and an indispensable one, inciting the mind to activity in other fields and thus becoming indirectly responsible for what is accomplished outside its own domain.

The first and more fundamental of these positions not only seems to imply a confusion of the speculative and practical, but also a vast exaggeration of the place which poetry, considered as doctrinal and speculative, may be said to hold in the hierarchy of the sciences. To establish this general criticism of Shelley's position is no brief or easy task.

Our initial objection to Shelley's position will be, of course, that it is not possible to speak of all the activities of the imagination — understood here as an intellectual power — as being poetry; or, more correctly, that it is not possible to conceive of the intellect as following a single mode of operation when considered as functioning in both science and art. To recall what was said at the beginning of the preceding chapter, poetry is primarily a making; any knowing or doctrinal aspect it may have cannot guide us to its nature, and there is even less reason to attribute the poetical function to the same intellect which carries on the work of knowing as there would be in the case of the two activities of reason and imagination, which Shelley is always so determined to keep apart. Although apparently a simple point, this one deserves our close attention because, in spite of its confirmation by normal experience, it is called in question by a good many modern writers on aesthetics and literary criticism, who are inclined to look upon poetry as primarily a means of knowing rather than as a work

<sup>1</sup> Similar statements are scattered throughout his essay. For example, "Language, color, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonym of the cause." "Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created..." "...The dramatic and lyrical poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect in the kindred expressions of the poetical faculty: architecture, painting, music, the dance, sculpture, philosophy, and we may add the forms of civil life."

of construction. Now, as already hinted, poetry does in some degree bring us new knowledge, but this is not its true or characteristic purpose; and overemphasis in this direction must inevitably lead to a mistaken notion of its nature.

Some additional explanation of the preceding remarks may be welcomed, even though it means repeating certain observations already made at the beginning of chapter IX.<sup>1</sup> First we must see that there is no way of separating the faculties or operations of the mind except by their objects. Sight would not be distinguishable from hearing, nor justice from temperance, unless in each instance a particular field of operation could be identified. As for science and art, these have very different formal objects: the speculative thinker is concerned with things in their universal and necessary aspect; whereas the poet has to do with a far less rational object which is never quite devoid of contingency. The poet does not stand at an opposite extreme with the historian, who must deal with the contingent as contingent, but he handles things which are nevertheless not universal in themselves, upon which he will confer the kind of universality realised in an image. *Poetica scientia est de his quae propter defectum veritatis non possunt a ratione capi; unde oportet quod quasi quibusdam similitudinibus ratio seducatur...*<sup>2</sup> Poetic meaning is read into things, so to speak, rather than revealed in them; the objects of poetry are valuable and significant only because over them has been thrown "a certain coloring of the imagination," — in Wordsworth's phrase.<sup>3</sup> In the very act of making an image, the poet makes a meaning; but the man of science merely searches out a meaning, that is, he seeks the knowledge of the thing in itself through discovery of its causes. So that even if poet and scientist are imagined as facing the same subject, their attitudes towards it might remain very different: the artist, because he is chiefly interested in those properties of the object which will enable him to use it, will prize accidental and transient features as much as those which are essential and permanent, and may find that elements necessary to one design may be of no value for another; the scientist, who is pursuing the actual design, not attempting to realise one of his own, must do his best to found all speculation on true and significant attributes and will therefore abandon the most painfully constructed hypothesis whenever it is found to be in conflict with solid evidence. This

<sup>1</sup> Above, pp. 209ff.

<sup>2</sup> ST. THOMAS, *In I Sententiarum*, Prolog., q. 1, a. 5, ad 3.

<sup>3</sup> The entire sentence should perhaps be quoted: "The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature..." (From the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) — So it is not the laws of universal nature, but those of human nature, which the poet will trace in his incidents and situations; nor is it even human nature taken objectively, as studied by ethics or psychology, that is meant, but rather that of the poet himself. We may recall the expression of Shelley already commented upon in chapter VI: "...A poem... is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator..." (See above, p. 189).

attitude of utter freedom with regard to nature whereby poetry stands in such contrast to science is characteristic of every genuine artist and was never more perfectly expressed than by Shelley himself:

He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom  
Nor heed nor see, what things they be;  
But from these create he can  
Forms more real than living man  
Nurslings of immortality.<sup>1</sup>

But if it be the scientific mind which is really devoted to the object, whereas the poetic is bound to no such loyalty, how is it that art seems to have immeasurably the greater power to set the thing itself vividly before us, sometimes with more force and truth than it had in actual experience? "Poetry," said Keats "should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself — but with its subject." Such art, it is plain, must presuppose at least an intense contemplation of the object, something like that described in the famous phrase: "When a sparrow comes before my window, I take part in its existence and peck about the gravel." But there is really no difficulty here. When Keats looked from his window, it was not with the eye of a naturalist; he did not study the sparrow in the true sense of the word; he did not seek to account for it, he identified himself with it; and this is the only sense in which poetry can be impersonal, whereas science is strictly and utterly impersonal. The power of poetic seeing may be a precious gift of the mind, but it does not result in science and, if it enables the poet to put the object before us more directly than can be done by the descriptive analysis of zoology, it is not by giving us the bird itself, but by giving us a vivid impression, a "feeling-understanding," of what it is like to see a bird, or perhaps even to be one. Keats himself, in those same incomparable letters, explains the difference with which we are concerned in words which leave nothing to be added:

Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest man shows a grace in his quarrel. By a superior Being our reasonings may take the same tone — though erroneous they may be fine. This is the very thing in which consists Poetry, and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy — For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth.

There is no real sense in which poetry, even in the widest acceptance of the term, can be said to "comprehend all science." In a superficial or material sense, of course, both may deal with the same subject; the essentially human urge to give the objects of thought a poetic form knows no limits and may exercise itself upon the same quarrel in the streets which excites the consideration of the moralist, or, just as readily, upon the very judgement which the moralist will pass on the brawl; but the artist views the "grace" in such things, their reconcilability with the mind; the moralist would know them as they are in themselves. It is never formally the same

<sup>1</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, II. 743-9.

object the two are dealing with, and the difference between them is fundamental. Yet in spite of this basic contrast between scientific and poetic thinking; in spite of the fact that poetry is obviously not, like science, an attempt to investigate or prove, still it does possess in some degree the character of doctrine, the power of leading us from the more well-known to the less well-known.<sup>1</sup> Hence it does enjoy some sort of affinity with science and it should be possible to expose a relation between the two, whereby it might be seen that poetry is to be accounted for, not merely by a desire to construct a knowable object, but in terms of the same motive which accounts for science itself, namely the quest for simple knowledge, universal and permanent. When the exact degree of this affinity has been established, it will be clear what rank poetry may be assigned in the domain of doctrine; and that this position is far lower than Shelley would have us think.

To see how the mind, in its pursuit of knowledge, can come to make use of poetry as well as of science, it will be necessary to consider the nature and degrees of efficacy of our intellectual operations. This task is achieved for us by St. Thomas, with his usual sureness and brevity, in the prologue to his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, upon which we are dependent for the essential propositions of the analysis which follows. St. Thomas begins with the provocative remark that the operations of reason are similar in one respect to those of nature, the resemblance lying, we are told a moment later, in the varying degrees of reliability or efficiency characteristic of both. At first glance it may seem like a betrayal of human intelligence to compare the certitude of its operations with that of natural processes; but, although the reflection may not be a comforting one, there is no escaping the fact that the mind is a nature in a natural universe and cannot claim exemption from the imperfection pervading everything else; besides which, our daily experience should be enough, heaven knows, to prove that reason can miss its mark at least as easily as do agents of the irrational world. Assuming such a comparison to be valid, then, it can be shown that, just as in nature certain effects take place by irresistible necessity, so, in the functioning of the mind, there will be in some instances a corresponding degree of absolute certitude; and just as in nature there can be break-down or failure more or less complete, so reason may reach conclusions of decreasing shades of probability down to the total collapse represented by utter falsehood. In other words, man's investigation of the universe will, in some directions, attain unmistakable truth, in others, only explanations more or less adequate, while in others, finally, the complexity and instability of events will leave it completely baffled.

Now, it is obvious that for the intelligent being there is nothing more precious than certitude, "an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth," and by this absolute standard all our knowledge will be measured; the name of

<sup>1</sup> The term doctrine is used here and elsewhere of the knowledge which poetry admittedly communicates because it is conveniently broad in its significance, embracing not only strict scientific knowledge, but also that which is probable, or even the effect of mere persuasion. It thus permits us to establish a certain affinity between poetry and science without the risk of ever implying that they are of the same nature.

science, in accurate philosophy, being conferred only on knowledge rendered sure through understanding of causes. But the misfortune of man is to enjoy such certitude concerning very few things, and these the least necessary to his daily security and happiness. Mathematics, — a realm where clarity is purchased at the expense of the vitality and concreteness of objects; metaphysics, in its simpler aspects, before much strain is put upon our powers of abstract reasoning; elementary natural philosophy; and a few basic moral precepts — these constitute the sum of what mortals may know with perfect certitude of the universe which offers them so vast and marvellous an object of study, and in which they must work and suffer in pursuit of the good life. Such knowledge, in short, is a meagre shadow of the complex and changing reality towards which the mind is striving and it is small comfort to be told that this colorless silhouette is a trustworthy likeness, within its limits, of the living actuality. Of necessity, intelligence will see, in the simple propositions which express the primary kind of truth furnished by the basic sciences, only something to begin with, an indispensable preliminary, like the chart one should procure before venturing into unknown country.

But so various and so full of mystery is the universe, and so inferior our power of knowledge, that our progress towards wider and deeper comprehension cannot retain the assurance with which we grasped the bare outline of reality and traced the elementary sketch with which all exploration had to begin. The way grows more uncertain as we proceed; throngs of unrelated objects surround us; we are caught with them in a bewildering flux of change and chance, and soon our efforts to fill in the details and blank spaces on our simple chart begin to take on the nature of conjecture, more or less supported by what has been heard and seen. Such are the hypotheses indispensable to natural science — attempts to press further into the unknown by extending something like fictional parallels of latitude and longitude and by plotting a course, not purely imaginary, to be sure, but based on inadequate experience of the tract it proposes to cover. By such means a knowledge is acquired, which may be strengthened and confirmed by further experience, but which can never take on the nature of true science because this knowledge begins and ends, not in logical necessity, but in an observation of fact which we can never be sure is complete. Let us choose to give this thinking and the type of knowledge it achieves the name of dialectic.

It may now be seen that, while genuine science is always loyal to truth in its pursuit of truth, dialectic finds itself in the curious and frustrated position of being obliged to seek truth by abandoning it in the building of its elaborate mental constructions. As soon as such a step is taken, the mind is on the road which leads to poetry. In the words of one student of modern scientific method: in hypothesis, the mind "feels free to anticipate reality by its guesses, to question it, to experiment, to distrust and doubt appearances, to rearrange the world, at least in thought, to play with it and with itself. For hypothesis is a sort of game with reality, akin to fancy,



make-believe, fiction, and poetry."<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis, however, is resorted to when events reveal some valid basis for their inclusion in probable propositions, that is, when, being already in some degree comprehensible, they impel the reasoner to make them the foundation of a tentative solution. But what will man do when he finds himself overwhelmed by a mass of incident in which he can find no significant elements, no acceptable grounds whatever, for the erection of an hypothesis? Such hopeless puzzles might be set aside, perhaps, in favor of more profitable objects of study, were it not that they so often concern what are literally matters of life and death. For it is in his existence as a moral being, in his grief and joy, in his origin and destiny as a thinking mind, that man is most oppressed by the burden of the mystery. Some way of escape and relief must be found; intelligence could not survive as the passive victim of the unintelligible — and yet in the fluctuating mass of circumstance which envelops it there is no apparent sign of order. It is at this extremity that the human spirit, still moved by the same desire to understand which has carried it through science and dialectic, a desire intensified ten-fold by the vital urgency of the material, now finally puts reality aside and, doing all that is left for it to do, gathers together these conflicting elements in the expression of an order of its own devising. In so far as it may be said to possess in its own right the nature of doctrine, this is poetry. "The use of this feigned history," states the philosopher for whom Shelley had such veneration, "hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it."<sup>2</sup>

The terms of this judgement upon the nature of art should perhaps be relaxed in one respect. So far poetry has been spoken of as comparable to science in that it exemplifies a tendency to advance beyond dialectic in order to grapple with the unintelligible as dialectic does with the probable. But, as we suggested in our discussion of the origin of metaphor, poetry also springs from a desire to get better grasp of anything whatever, by clothing it in a form proportioned to our mode of apprehension. This amounts to saying that, if, by some impossibility, man had perfect scientific knowledge of all things, so that there were no longer any place for dialectic, there would yet remain a genuine function for poetry, — not as attempting to solve a mystery, but as making the irrefutable also irresistible by presenting it in terms of flesh and blood.

The purpose of the analysis just made is not to belittle poetry, nor to question its necessity for the human race, but simply to reach an understanding of its nature in terms of true science. From this standpoint it should be clear that the title given it by St. Thomas, *infima doctrina*, at first sight harsh and ungenerous, is strictly accurate; as possessing actual power to teach, to impart new knowledge and certain knowledge, poetry is little more than the tenuous and shadowy counterpart of real doctrine, weaker than the most unlikely surmises of dialectic and utterly remote from

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in the History and Method of Science*, ed. C. SINGER, (Oxford, 1921): Vol. II. *Hypothesis*, by F. C. S. SCHILLER, p. 430.

<sup>2</sup> FRANCIS BACON, *The Advancement of Learning*, II, iv, 2. Cf. the passage from ST. THOMAS already quoted on p. 234.

the certitude of science. Eliminate from poetry that which it has borrowed from other departments of knowledge; judge it as one does demonstrations or hypotheses, that is, strictly in accordance with its success as an explanation of the things with which it deals, and it becomes plain that Shelley's claims that it is "the root and blossom of all other systems of thought" or that "it creates new materials of knowledge" are quite untenable.

Is poetry mere fiction then? and if, as seems to be implied above, it is not quite that, how may it be distinguished from the purely imaginary? Finally, assuming it is remote, both from true knowledge and from actual fact, what can possibly account for its mighty power to bring us peace of mind and power of conduct? In order to reply to these inquiries, it will be necessary to establish more precisely the relations between the poem and the dialectical hypothesis, and then to contrast the peculiar shortcomings and advantages of poetry with the corresponding virtues and defects of pure science.

Both hypothesis and poem are constructions of the mind, which can never pass its frontiers, which, that is, can never find that complete verification in reality which would make them universally true. The difference between them lies in this, that the former is erected upon a genuinely probable connection in events and is designed solely to enable the mind to draw closer to the truth of fact; whereas the latter is bound to retain only an air of probability and is valued for its own sake. There is no need to insist on these characteristics of the hypothesis, it being obvious that no scientific theory is going to survive a moment after it has either been shown to have no basis in fact, or to offer less promise of leading to further fact than some other. The question of the type of probability or likelihood which survives in poetry, however, is a rather more delicate matter. As we tried to show in our treatment of poetry and history, the nature of art is essentially intermediate; it is the expression of the real world in an ideal order, — that which is, transformed, after a fashion into that which should be. So the kind of probability a poem requires is unique in that it must conform to a double standard, corresponding to its two sources, the real and the ideal. First, the poetic event must have such likelihood as to make us feel that such an incident might well happen in real life; secondly, it must be acceptable as an integral part of the logical and coherent whole which the artist is constructing. In other words, Hamlet's conduct must never appear unlikely for a real human being imagined in similar circumstances; while at the same time he must always act in accordance with the character which the dramatist has given him and with the requirements of the plot. The great point is, of course, that neither of these stipulations is enough to procure for the poetic incident anything like actual or true probability, because the demands of intrinsic structure do not suppose any reference whatever to the real world, and that poetic probability which does suppose such a reference need not be a true probability but only an appearance of such — a likely impossibility being more acceptable, to repeat Aristotle's phrase, than an unconvincing possibility. In short, there is no deceit in poetry; it frankly presents its world as an art-world, never as a

real one. All that is required of any poem is that the incidents have sufficient likelihood to ensure their acceptance; neither the poet nor his audience will think of testing the work of art by applying to it the principles of science, except in so far as certain of these, perhaps, have become so accepted a part of common knowledge that any contradiction of them will violently distract the attention. The poet's natural descriptions, then, need not be based on the findings of the botanist or biologist, nor his treatment of historical themes the researches of historians; from such necessities the poetic mind is free because it is building a world of its own, the purpose of which is not to teach us something of the nature of the real world, but rather to consider how that world affects us; to make man's very subjection to the external by sense and passion the object of contemplation and, by imposing upon it a rational order and interpretation, to achieve a certain release from the oppression of circumstance. It would be impossible to improve on Shelley's own words:

But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos.

So flimsy, then, is the bond between poetry and fact; so little do we think of employing it as an instrument of research like the hypothesis, that inevitably it must be valued for itself alone. The sources and degree of this value should be the next subject of consideration, but we feel obliged first to utter a warning against a position at the opposite extreme to Shelley's which would make poetry completely independent of life. The thing to be stressed is that, while its link with reality is too weak to require of poetry more than a mere air of truth, rather than genuine probability, that link with reality is none the less essential. A work of art without the semblance of truth is a failure. What we ask of the poet is not mere fantasy, but rather an order and a calm such that they may be "prolonged into the tumult of familiar life." The good artist may not entirely disregard nature; he may handle it freely, but not arbitrarily; anything which plainly "o'ersteps the modesty of nature" is inartistic and ineffectual.

O! there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

Although only *infima doctrina*, the weakest and most shadowy form of human knowledge, nevertheless poetry is *doctrina*: to break the faint hold on truth which it retains means reducing it to mere skilful make-believe, to which no rational being should turn for guidance. As we tried to show in the preceding chapter, this duty towards nature becomes crucial when the artist is dealing with the moral life of mankind; if he has no obligation to respect the truth, nothing can be forbidden him, and his images of human conduct, no matter how perverse or corrupt, might justly be ranked with the great classics.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp.220-221.

There is no intention of suggesting that a work which conveys a wrong conception of nature is thereby completely spoiled artistically. On the contrary, the resulting image may retain considerable interest and value. In the first place, it will have the charm of an intelligible object whose every sensuous quality contributes to its intelligibility. Secondly, although never attaining the perfect integrity of the image loyal to nature, it will nevertheless reveal integrity of a kind; and the skill with which this has been achieved, in the face of the difficulties occasioned by the unfortunate subject, may well excite an admiration beyond what is deserved. It is a little like paintings of monstrous and unnatural beings — let us say a surrealist vision of a creature with limbs and organs borrowed from human, brute and insect forms: that such a grotesque representation should ever attain the unity of nature is quite impossible, yet it may be managed so cleverly as to achieve an astonishing air of life. The end in art may be an unfortunate choice, but in the devising of means to reach it great power and intelligence may be displayed. When the subject concerns essential moral conduct, however, it is obvious what danger will lie in a skilful image, imparting a certain persuasiveness to an unreal and mischievous interpretation of moral law.

Our inquiry into the source and extent of the value of poetry may be resumed by remarking that the preservation of a certain likelihood is, of course, only the necessary condition, not the cause of the peculiar force felt in works of art. Their effectiveness is hardly to be accounted for by a mere appearance of probability. "Forms more real than living man," they seem to their creator; the feeblest of all manifestations of human knowledge, we have called them, yet wielding a power greater than that of the loftiest science; airy nothings, which somehow have taken on a local habitation and a name. This paradoxical condition suggests the existence of elements difficult to reconcile, and even to identify. Poetry is an elusive object because, as has been emphasized perhaps too often, it holds a delicate balance between the particular and the general, between the sensible and the intelligible; this equilibrium being as difficult for the student to apprehend as for the artist to maintain. Just as art shows a constant tendency to sway between the extremes of mere emotionalism on the one hand, and of didacticism on the other; so the analysis of its nature must beware of extinguishing in it all trace of the universal, yet at the same time insist on its attributes as a singular. The method now proposed is to take the real concrete particular as the common meeting-point of pure science and poetry, and to compare the two, in order to discover what there is about the special relation of poetry to reality, which makes the poet cry that a single moment with him may yield us more than "years of toiling reason."

Before beginning, it will perhaps be well to remind the reader once again that poetry is not taken here as furnishing adequate expression for the conclusions of science — a task it can assume whenever it chooses and on the importance of which comment will be made in due course — but as an independent effort to make reality more acceptable to the mind. Taking science first, it will be noted that, when it attacks reality, the result is a

proposition actually true, that is, possessing intelligibility which is that of the object itself; but this knowledge is sadly limited, because it allows only an inadequate grasp of the reality with which it deals and because the intelligence, having got hold of its truth by abstraction, has been forced in the process to jettison all the richness of the sensible and concrete. When poetry deals with reality, it makes no effort to pursue the intelligible in it, but seeks to make use of the reality in order to create something more intelligible than reality itself seems to be. The work of art, therefore, is not *actually* true: its intelligibility is not that of the object itself, but a man-made, constructed intelligibility. Poetry does not really "strip the veil of familiarity from the world, and lay bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms," it only provides a new object, beautiful in itself, a suggestion and foretaste of that hidden loveliness which the intellect divines in natural things but can never reach. Whether poetry "spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things," that is, whether it tends to represent the ideal as real or vice versa, "it equally creates for us a being within our being." Hence, although really an instance of the mind's surrender in the face of impenetrable mystery, the work of art will never strike us as limited or inadequate, but rather the contrary; first, because, as a human and intellectual construction, it will be whole and coherent, — as the humblest cottage appears more finished than a mountain; secondly, because its partial origin in a desire for adequate expression and the fact that what it has to express cannot be put into a direct proposition, place it under a double compulsion to employ the essentially poetic means of communication (wherein also lies the true secret of its power), the image.

This necessity of the image for the poet deserves our closest attention. Having already dealt with it as enabling him to give a satisfying sensible form to what he has to say, it now remains to be shown that there is something in the actual nature of his message demanding this peculiar medium. In other words, we must try to determine what is this supposed "inexpressible," which cannot be put into plain words but only "imitated." Our answer lies in that elusive but perfect phrase of Aristotle, a phrase illustrating only too well the deceptive air of simplicity so often characteristic of his thought, — it is *what should be*. Confronted by reality, the poet does not seek to render as it is in itself that seemingly insoluble and disheartening riddle; a task which, even if it were possible, would result in futile photography. Nor can he gratify the mind by calling down from above some ultimate, undreamed-of perfection which, although the desire for it may be driving him to work, has never been experienced or known and, even if it were, would have to be "so told as earthly notion can receive." That which he aims to express is simply *what should be*: in other words, what is, made as perfect as he can imagine it. Now this, we contend, cannot be stated. It cannot be stated because, as the point of fusion or junction of two extremes, neither of which the mind can grasp, it is simply not sufficiently intelligible. Should the poet search within himself for what he possesses of it, he will find principally a mass of feeling and emotion, not



genuine truth, so that the object of his consideration inevitably becomes, not a real thing, but a body of impressions never translatable into straightforward propositions, but only to be communicated by means of likenesses. It must be noted also that the subject in these cases is one that concerns us deeply, so deeply that it becomes, not a matter for mere intellectual consideration, but a matter for reform; it is not a re-statement we want, but a reconstruction; and this desire, it may be added, would persist even if the mind enjoyed perfect intellectual enlightenment concerning its unhappy lot; just as the criminal awaiting sentence, however submissive to justice, will never forgo his dreams of pardon. Once again, such a rebuilding of the scheme of things is not possible through a set of propositions, but requires the intelligible 'unity in complexity' of the image.

An amusing and thoroughly effective illustration of these principles is to be found in Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*. Here we see poetry harnessed to drag its own corpse to the grave, so to speak; for the true comic value of Caliban's account of creation lies in the fact that Setebos, the god, is represented as laboring at his universe under the unhappy limitations of a mere human artist. He has looked both up and down but nowhere found hope of peace. The sphere of existence which he is fated to occupy fills him with profound dissatisfaction, and in this restless discontent the impulse to create is born:

...it came of being ill at ease:  
He hated that he cannot change his cold,  
Nor cure its ache.

But why unhappy, why cold and ill at ease in the region wherein he makes his home? It is in part because he is dimly aware of a possibility of perfection:

...Ask, for that,  
What knows, — the something over Setebos  
.....  
There may be something quiet o'er his head,  
Out of his reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,  
Since both derive from weakness in some way.

Setebos, then, that caricature of the divine Artist; who with such wretched power of reason as he enjoys, is yet "many-handed as the cuttle-fish,"

Looks up, first, and perceives he cannot soar  
To what is quiet and hath happy life;  
Next looks down here, and out of very spite  
Makes this a bauble-world to ape yon real.

.....  
'T is solace making baubles, aye, and sport.

But although his creation yields him some joy, for it is at least better than the miserable world he has to live in, there are sad shortcomings in the handiwork of Setebos. He cannot give it the only virtue which his own world seems to possess — reality; so that it becomes something he may contemplate, but into which he can never enter:

He could not, himself, make a second self  
 To be his mate; as well have made himself.  
 He would not make what he dislikes or slights,  
 An eyesore to him, or not worth his pains:  
 But did, in envy, listlessness or sport,  
 Make what himself would fain, in a manner, be —  
 Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,  
 Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,  
 Things he admires and mocks too...

All that remains to complete our comparison of poetry and science is suggested in those final telling lines. The use of the image is what gives to poetry its extraordinary air of independent reality; for it is the nature of the image to signify, yet remain apart from what is signified; to be particular and sensible, and yet to stand in the place of the universal and abstract. In its identification with the image, in short, lies at once the grandeur and the misery of art, for by this means it can exert the vivid sense appeal felt in the vital forms of the real world — overcoming in this respect one of the deficiencies of science — and at the same time offer the intellect a genuine significance. But, alas, the image is also a refuge from the actual, a beautiful semblance of the real which delights but cannot ultimately satisfy us; whereas the humblest proposition of science, colorless and incomplete though it be, represents the sure and unshakable grip of the intellect on what is. Science sacrifices the consolation of having the concrete, sensible object under its fingers, in order to attain a statement which, though it express only part of the object, yet expresses something of the very truth of its being. Poetry abandons that genuine universality in order to form the image which, although it comforts the mind by making a vivid appeal to both sense and intellect, displaying a wholeness only possible in a work of art, nevertheless, has not quite the validity of the actual singular even for the sense, nor for the intellect the penetration of the true universal. Yet, poetry “was ever thought to raise and erect the mind by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things.”<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore a grave mistake and one too often made nowadays to be led by the mysterious charm of poetry to suppose that by its agency the mind may see deeper into the life of things than is possible by other means. It is equally a mistake of course to reproach the poet with having given us an idle fiction. Poetry does mean something: its expressions have the nature of universals and in some measure can be paraphrased. But the great force of poetry lies, not in its significance, but in its air of significance. The image exerts its strange power precisely because it is an image, standing apart from what is imitated, carrying us apparently to the very threshold of the mystery and “teasing us out of thought” by forever pointing to something it cannot say. The intelligibility of every true work of art appears unlimited because of this vital interplay, — the images send

<sup>1</sup> *Advancement of Learning*, IV, iv, 2.

the mind back to the original which in turn constantly suggests new aspects in the things to which it has been likened. Poetry can never say its meaning straight out, for then it would cease to imitate; the indirection of similitude and parable are of its nature; so that, in the very act of giving us the original, it is also holding it back. Of all forms of human expression that of the poet will seem the richest and most inexhaustible, not because of what it actually utters, but because of the countless interpretations which it suggests and invites. Shelley's extravagant praises of his art, which must arouse our sympathy, are really a confirmation of this principle:

All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight.

It is hard to turn the cold eye of philosophy on such a splendid tribute, and hard to distinguish the false from the true in what it contains. It is true that all high poetry will seem to possess unlimited significance, and to offer a new value to each succeeding generation of men; true also that the meaning which men will draw from a great poem will largely depend upon their own peculiar relations. But this last observation particularly should make us realise that the richness and variety of the interpretations are to be attributed to a condition very different from that suggested by the simile of the veils drawn back one by one from a hidden shrine. The image is a tantalising thing: it does not give us the original and have done, but seems to beckon us towards it and then to bar the way with its own enchanting form; it is an expression which appears to repudiate its own nature by refusing to yield up what it has been constituted to utter; a kind of baffling picture-writing to which no mind will ever find the key. Like a Sibyl repeating prophetic formulas, poetry can offer us only marvellous hints and portents of the truth, and then must remain silent at all our inquiries because the final significance of her sayings is as much of a mystery to her as to us. The inmost naked beauty of the meaning of a great poem can never be exposed because it is not there. A greater poet than Shelley has given us an image of the function of art which is far more true and deep. Virgil was permitted to lead Dante to the very gates of Paradise, but he could go no farther; the spirit of Wisdom in the person of Beatrice was then sent to conduct the poet into the region of eternal truth.

Our exposition, in fact, attempts to trace the mean between two extreme tendencies exemplified by certain modern writers on aesthetics. One of these is inclined to exaggerate the uniqueness of poetry, representing it as the product of some ineffable creative and visionary faculty, which can bring us intuitive knowledge more profound than any to be won through reasoning. The other, originating in a crude materialism, would deny there is a greater difference between artistic experience and any other than "between the experiences of smoking and writing." Both these opinions seem unacceptable. According to the first view, poetry shall become

"not our servant, but our master" in the actual phrase used by A. C. Bradley in his famous essay. According to the second, it would be thrust down from the high rank it does hold (for it does hold a high rank, although not so high as the first school would have it) to become merely another item in the vulgar throng of daily affairs. Against the first view, we maintain that the direct creative activities of poetry are not to be taken as proof of the god-like dominion of mind over nature, nor as proof of the possession by certain individuals of some preternatural gift of inspiration; they are proof, rather, of the inadequacy of our power of apprehending nature and of our desire to be delivered from our servitude to it. As for the knowledge attained by such means, however perfect it may be in the human mode, it cannot rank with the truths of science. Against the second view we would protest that, if there is as much difference between poetic experience and, let us say, snoring, as there is between writing and smoking, then the difference is very considerable indeed. This is no place for a general criticism of materialism, but in our mind it is absurd to suppose that the thinking of thoughts and the calculating of the best means of expressing them is carried on by faculties of the same order as those employed when the writer, between phrases, puffs on his cigarette.

Before the problem is finally set aside, it might be useful to summarise as clearly as possible those precise respects in which art may be said to be allied to science. In this way some amends may be made for the shortcomings and obscurity of the preceding exposition.

Although our discussion has emphasized only the most important and fundamental one, it seems possible to distinguish three separate ways in which poetry may be said to have some relationship with science:

(1) Daily experience and the use of science itself have brought us a certain reliable knowledge, however imperfect, of the laws of nature. The world is not a total chaos: "in nature's infinite book of secrecy, a little we can read." We bring this knowledge with us to the contemplation of works of art, and the artist cannot afford to contradict it openly, although he may at times be obliged to preserve only an appearance of loyalty to its principles. It is in virtue of such established principles that we cannot help disliking, in architecture a roof or dome which seems to defy the law of gravity, or a piece of sculpture treating stone as if it had the plasticity of clay. Similarly the writings of the true poet, although not designed to convey information concerning the real world, will always reflect our common knowledge of earth and of nature:

Not he to feed upon a breast unthanked,  
Or eye a beauteous face in a cracked glass.  
But he can spy that little twist of brain  
Which moved some weighty leader of the blind,  
Unwitting 't was the goad of personal pain,  
To view in curst eclipse our Mother's mind,  
And show us of some rigid harridan  
The wretched bondmen till the end of time.

Such adherence to common principles is necessary in poetry: our instinctive insistence upon it is already evidence — and here is the great point — that there survives in poetry a vestigial participation in the nature of higher types of doctrine. Suppose a poet violates principles of this kind: if his sin were against science only, then poetry and science might be inferred to stand in different categories, with no bond whatever between them; but such a violation, as we have seen, is an artistic blunder too, and so becomes proof that the shadow of science stretches even into the domain of poetry, or, to take a different metaphor, that in poetry the human mind is merely resting by the wayside, dreaming of the truth which is the unalterable goal of its journey.<sup>1</sup>

(2) To a statement that might have been made by a philosopher or scientist, poetry adds all that is implied by perfect adequateness of expression. We are given the statement in a form which completely suits our habit of mind; not only accompanied by the emotional response it has aroused, but actually conveyed in part by means of such feelings. What this means is that we can now think about it more easily and effectively; there is a positive gain in intelligibility, for which the credit must go to poetry and, in virtue of which, it may truly be called doctrinal. Of the sophistic proposition that "in whatever words you put a given thing your meaning is the same," Aristotle remarks, "This is untrue. One term may describe a thing more truly than another, may be more like it, and set it more intimately before our eyes. Besides, two different words will represent a thing in two different lights; so on this ground also one term must be held fairer or fouler than another. For both of two terms will indicate what *is* fair, or what *is* foul, but not simply their fairness or their foulness, or if so, at any rate not in an equal degree."<sup>2</sup> So subtly effective is this sensuous quality of poetic language in producing a vivid and splendid object for the mind, that we may be led to feel a truth scarcely deserves attention when it lacks such a form. Poetry, declared Wordsworth, "is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science"; and he continues:

<sup>1</sup> It should scarcely be necessary to remark that there is no defining the exact extent of this knowledge presupposed by both poet and audience. Time, place, degrees of culture and education, together with that fundamental ethic which is the simplest and most universal of these conditions — all contribute to impose restraints upon the artist with respect to choice and treatment of subject. A martial theme, for example, could not be treated in modern as in ancient times; or again, in our age, a poem on electricity, aviation, or the like, full of childish and obvious error, would surely be an artistic failure.

As a further means of clarifying the exact nature of the knowledge referred to above, it might be well to distinguish it clearly from:

(a) That fidelity to mere sense experience, or loyalty to the simple feel of things which the poet must observe. In other words, his impressions of the universe must be approximately those of normal man using the external senses; not the impressions available through microscope, X-ray, or such unnatural apparatus; not those of a person abnormally deficient or unbalanced with respect to sensation. Such sense experience, of course, is not true knowledge at all and, while present in both science and poetry, is only materially so and cannot lead to a definition of either.

(b) The incidental knowledge, possibly quite accurate, in which a poem may be very rich; the history and agriculture in Virgil, the theology and philosophy in Dante. A poem may gain in effect from such information, but not in artistic effect; and an error here is not necessarily an artistic blunder.

<sup>2</sup> *Rhetorica*, III, chap. 2, 1405b10.



If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.<sup>1</sup>

But a moment's reflection on the sad limitations of artists who exaggerate the emotional at the expense of the intellectual element, should reveal how very little the finest expression can add to that which the poet utters in common with the philosopher. Haunting images and a thrilling music are splendid reinforcement for a lofty thought, but in themselves of no more consequence than the passing sensations of daily experience, the thought having need of them because of the limitations of the human mind. Only a thinker great enough to appreciate this inborn weakness of reason could relegate the lovely speech of poets to its proper place in words as calm and detached as these: "The arts of language cannot help having a small but real importance, whatever it is we have to expound to others: the way in which a thing is said does affect its intelligibility. Not, however, so much importance as people think. All such arts are fanciful and meant to charm the hearer. Nobody uses fine language when teaching geometry."<sup>2</sup> In poetry, the object is presented as delightful in order that we may be induced to feel and to accept its truth. In science, the object is presented as true, and thereupon only, as pleasurable.

(3) Thirdly, poetry again has something to teach as a mere work of human ingenuity, as any building can reveal something of the principles of its construction. It is science of this kind, drawn from the study of eminent poets, which is found in the *Poetics*, and which we too are trying to achieve: general principles, laws and rules, always of a very extraneous and universal nature, of course — for no one could learn to write a poem out of a book — which yet are true as far as they go and not without value even to the working artist.

Returning to the double claim which Shelley makes for poetry: that, taken in the generic sense, it is the common source of all arts and sciences; and that, taken in the restricted sense, it performs the lesser, although still necessary, function of stimulating the mind to activity in other fields, — it should be clear that the first of these propositions is irreconcilable with our understanding of the relations of art and science. As we saw, one belongs rather to the practical order, the other to the speculative, — a basic difference; and, further, even though poetry does possess a speculative or doctrinal value, giving it a certain affinity with science, this is so feeble and shadowy that, if we were determined to force the two into a single category, as Shelley does, the consequence would be that poetry would emerge as a kind of debased science, rather than science an inferior species of poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.*

<sup>2</sup> *Rhetorica*, LII, chap.1, 1404a8.

We now propose to treat of the second and less ambitious claim. Here we must note in the beginning that, while Shelley insists on the vital service of poetry, as awakening and inciting the mind to "the invention of the grosser sciences" and to social reform, that is, as able to function in cooperation with reason and science, he also acknowledges a certain hostility between the two. Reason, in the speculations of the mechanist and political economist, seems to show an unhappy "want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination"; it is a spirit of scientific rationalism he condemns for defacing those "eternal truths character'd upon the imaginations of men," which we have agreed with him in thinking true art will respect. The over-cultivation of the mechanical arts and the unjust distribution of their products seem also to be blamed on reason, which is finally described in a singular phrase as "the selfish and calculating principle." To consider such positions in detail or, above all, to reconcile them with what is said elsewhere, lies outside the scope of our work. It is enough for us to ascertain that Shelley's poetic sense was not in error when it led him to feel the possibility of both harmony and opposition between art and reason, and our duty will be to show how certain principles already established can explain this apparently contradictory condition.

Shelley, of course, has no right to suggest that the activities of reason are necessarily any more selfish than those of imagination or passion, since any function falling under the control of the will can be directed to good or evil ends. The moral aspects of the question are really not relevant here and only confuse or conceal the true causes of the opposition which the poet felt so keenly. Nor is he wise in making one term of the contrast reason, as operating especially in the practical sciences and mechanical arts; the latter is too much involved in the contingent, too likely to do mischief quite incidentally; as well as too similar to the fine arts in mode of operation, for it to be easy to detect where the real differences lie. To be properly understood, the conflict must be raised to a higher plane, as between fine art and reason in its most detached and loftiest function, that of pure science. It will then be seen that, if the goal of the human mind be conceived as the purest possible type of thinking, poetry clearly tends in the same direction as science. The distinction between them is perhaps simply this, that science, or philosophy, is in itself the active labor of the mind to attain the ultimate plane of thought, whereas the office of poetry, as Shelley suggests, is of an auxiliary kind; so that the philosophic mode may be considered as very different from the poetic but not as necessarily destructive of it. Speculative science is a struggle against the equilibrium of what may be termed normal human nature; it is the striving of the mind to rise higher than its mortal lot would seem to justify; hence it is necessarily incomplete and insatiable. The philosopher's restless dissatisfaction is what urges him to abandon the city, if indeed it does not cause him to be driven out of it; the poet, on the contrary, is sure of the welcome and esteem of all men. Poetry seeks to gratify the desire of the mind for the kind of order which best suits it and hence implies a human integrity and completeness. But, whereas, for the multitude, the poet's images have

a compelling power, they can never satisfy the philosopher, and for this cause a certain hostility can arise between the two modes of thought. It remains true that the poetic mood may lead to philosophy, since it will respond to the divine cravings in man and, by its convincing approximations to ideal order, will even stimulate them; just as the toy replicas of the tools and weapons of adult life given to children, bring delight in themselves, yet strengthen the child's desire for the reality. But it need scarcely be observed that few poets will be content to accept a role so humble, so that the opposition between the two faculties will usually appear more vivid than the possibility of their alliance. The speculative thinker as he labors to free himself from the limitations of flesh and blood, to vindicate the divinity of reason by tending towards the divine in a quasi-divine mode, will be inclined to hear in poetry a siren call luring him aside from his difficult course, deliberately arousing the passions he has been working to subdue. The poet, in his turn, will tend to reject philosophy as an unnatural pursuit of futile abstractions which can give the human heart no rest, and to offer his image as truth itself in its highest form.

It may be helpful to consider how the grounds for opposition between the two are also revealed and illustrated by the fact that poetry is perhaps the last object to be studied by philosophy, and requires for its proper consideration a particularly high plane of detachment. On a process of reasoning it is easy enough for the reasoner to pass judgement; the pupil may even criticise his master in a question of abstract doctrine, — there being nothing personal about the communications of science, nothing which may not be transposed into another medium so as to become the property of any mind choosing to study it. With poetry, the case is quite different; here we need to be warned of the futility of "casting the violet into the crucible"; the object is not accessible to normal methods of analysis. The point is that, in poetry, the image is the essential means of communication, the image being significant of itself; whereas, in reasoning, an image will be only a necessary condition, attached to our thought somewhat like a handle or label, never fully expressive of it. Philosophy in fact is engaged in a constant, futile effort to reach a height of thought where images might be completely dispensed with. As it advances and develops its speculations, the shortcomings of the images associated with them become more and more manifest, until finally these must be cast aside and others chosen. The path of speculation will be strewn with shattered myths, as well as with shattered hypotheses. But the poet pursues the image for itself and is never expected to account for the use he makes of it; indeed, whenever explanations are felt to be necessary, the work of art is defective; the great strength of poetry lying precisely in that; by simply offering us the perfect image of our thought, it grants us the power of making a satisfying judgement with no obligation or need of accounting for it and thereby seems to render the calculations of science unnecessary. "Thinking in adequate images" is almost a definition of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Not to be understood in the superficial sense in which it would be applied to the extraordinary power of certain poets to develop a line of thought through a living sequence of metaphors, one growing out of the other, as in the famous "To-morrow

Furthermore, the impact of the image upon our senses and emotions is direct and powerful; if we do not feel it, we do not know what poetry is; if we do feel, we are more than likely to "bid sick Philosophy's last leaves whirl," at least for the time being. Of all the objects with which philosophy has to deal, poetry most easily eludes her efforts at detached scrutiny: first, because, as we have said, the image seems to brook neither reproach nor denial; secondly, because the impressions received from the work of art are so immediate and intimate that the difficulty of studying them becomes comparable to that of identifying an object by the sense of touch alone, — the agent is so involved in what he is sensing that he finds it next to impossible to criticise or compare.

The science of aesthetics will be a late development in philosophy and will indicate great maturity of intellect, that is able not only to resist the seductive charms of poetry, but to acknowledge that its images are not fairly criticised in terms of established truth or even of acceptable hypothesis, and are to be judged merely in accordance with certain general laws. In our final words let us repeat that the basic cause of these differences lies in the nature of the poetic image, as opposed to the scientific concept. In poetry the image is essential; the mind pursues an end fixed by itself, which is not a certain significance, but a certain significant image; and the poet's work thus becomes thoroughly his own, not only in its given end, but also as engaging all his faculties and, above all, those which are most personal and incommunicable, the senses and passions. In science, the objective is a concept which shall bring us the reality itself; the image required to support the concept is incidental and must positively be refused advertence.

ANTHONY DURAND.

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and to-morrow..." of Macbeth. The real object of the poet's thought, attained through such a chain of metaphors, is itself an image, that of the whole poem.