



## Shelley on the Nature of Poetry (I)

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# Shelley on the Nature of Poetry

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## INTRODUCTION

This study of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, although bearing the appearance of a commentary, does not have the objective usually associated with works described by that term. The writer of a commentary, generally speaking, may be thought to assume a two-fold duty: that of exposing clearly the meaning of the document he is studying, and then of making a critical estimate of the ideas it contains. But, whereas this notion of a commentator's function is proper and necessary wherever the student and the author of the work which is being examined share the same field of knowledge and the same scientific purpose, it is not applicable in the case where one science is seeking to utilize information furnished by another or found in a source which cannot be called scientific at all. To take an example, it is easy to see that a geologist's criticism of a work by a fellow-geologist is one thing, while his study of an account brought back by a party of hunters in the Andes, let us say, will be quite another. In the first instance his task will be that of the true commentator; in the second, it is a mere searching of an amateur report for experience unknown to himself which he may be able to put to use in founding or confirming hypotheses of his own science.

A student of philosophy approaching the great essay in which Shelley explains and defends his art will not be long in doubt as to which of the two alternatives just mentioned is thrust upon him. Whatever its author may have thought, the *Defence of Poetry* is not a philosophical work, nor would its fame or value be as great if it were. As a philosopher, Shelley is not important; as a poet, he is a treasure both to the world and to the science of philosophy, and to the latter in a special way because he is that rare phenomenon, an authentic poet who has left a splendid record of his experience of poetry. The famous essay, which is to be the chief object of our study, thus provides the philosopher with a true *topos*, or locus, in the Aristotelian sense, and we need only grasp the significance of this term to see exactly what sort of contribution the artist can make to our science and how that contribution is to be employed.

The locus is resorted to by the mind when it is dealing with uncertain and doubtful matters and can find no worthier basis for its reasonings. Then it must take its propositions where it can find them, doing its best to choose the most reliable, and to estimate the exact degree in which these deserve consideration. Such propositions may sometimes be drawn from the universal experience of mankind and may represent a high degree of probability; as when a psychologist, for example, might argue that the images in dreams are always related to things of which we have had actual

sensation at some time or other in the past. More often, however, confidence must be placed in the opinions of men who are quite literally expert, that is, who have a special experience not shared by others; and this happens so often nowadays in the experimental sciences that we are only mildly surprised to hear that a certain great physicist has never handled laboratory apparatus, or that some famous zoologist has never left his native country. Now the condition of aesthetics is in some degree similar. A great part of its task is to determine the nature and causes of art and, whatever art may or may not be, there is no doubting that it involves abilities and experience not shared in the same degree by all men. When a genuine artist, therefore, undertakes to tell what he knows of the processes of his art, he deserves that attention we would give to an account of specialised experience in any field where there are no surer means of securing information. It must never be forgotten, however, that the enjoyment of the experience is not the interpretation of it and that he who has the richest share of the former may be the least able to understand or explain what he has seen and felt so vividly. In the poet's case it may almost be predicted that he is not likely to be very successful in achieving a scientific analysis of the phenomena he is actually living; because the temperament and endowments which make a true artist are inclined to positively indispose a man towards the speculative and abstract. Whatever may be thought of this suggestion, it remains true that our science will place reliance on the poet as a thinker or theorist only accidentally, and will appeal to him primarily in his capacity as artist. Such an attitude almost finds justification enough in the mere style and general tone of the work we propose to examine, which is so essentially the utterance of a poetic, not of a scientific mind; nevertheless it has been felt necessary to state this position in explicit form because we are most of us inevitably inclined to consider that, as the poet knows best how to make poetry, so he should know best what it is he is making.

It will scarcely be necessary to detail the effects which this conception of the use to be made of Shelley's essay will have upon our handling of it. First of all, it should be clear that all consideration of the poet's own views in philosophy will be dismissed as totally irrelevant; it being of no more consequence to the science of aesthetics to know that he was a platonist than to know that he was a vegetarian. A somewhat greater regard may be shown for his personal opinions in matters of art, but always with perfect freedom to accept or reject as we see fit. What we shall really look for in Shelley is simply facts, the facts of his experience of poetry, of how it came to him, of what powers of mind and body it aroused, what materials it seemed to need, what labor and skill in execution, and so forth. Such facts cannot be questioned; an interpretation of them is to be judged as we would judge any other piece of reasoning. The reader must not be surprised, therefore, if certain sections of the *Defence* are ignored completely, or if matters which seemed crucial to its author are dismissed as of little consequence, while at other times great and valuable significance is assigned to some of his casual remarks. These tactics are the simple duty of science and find their parallel in the doctor who listens carefully to the tale of our

aches and pains, but coolly ignores our own anxious conjectures as he proceeds to his diagnosis. And it may perhaps be observed, although the matter is really irrelevant, that the policy just described is in fact the only one if a study of Shelley's essay is to achieve more than pleasant literary criticism or uncertain and valueless history. The first of these alternatives would mean a repetition with personal variations of the praises so often earned by his magnificent prose; the second would be the inevitable result of any attempt to criticise theories and opinions which the poet has expressed in terms so vague, and so often in conflict with his other writings, that it is hardly possible to know what his views were, much less to know what to think of them.

The guiding principles of this attempt to utilize the testimony of a great poet will be drawn from the same philosophy which has furnished its plan of attack. It will strive to be faithfully Aristotelian, out of a conviction that there is no reliable approach to the problems of art save through the basic principles laid down in the *Poetics*. Without going into the matter at length, it may be stated that, in this writer's opinion, the Aristotelian mind has for our purpose the immense advantage over those which lie at the extremes of idealism or materialism, that it never speculates a priori but believes in constant reference to experience as it proceeds. A good many modern theories of aesthetics, on the contrary, have a little the air of awkward afterthoughts; as if their authors, having elaborated or inherited some system of thought, were now faced with the troublesome problem of reconciling with it the phenomena of art. The very criticism occasionally made of the *Poetics*, that its observations deal only with the relatively few literary models which its writer knew, constitutes for us, therefore, a genuine claim to respect. Here was a thinker who regarded facts; who was content to keep his eye on the object and to study a tragedy with the accuracy and detachment of a biologist at work upon a specimen. No doubt such a mode of procedure means the end of any hope of complete synthesis and leaves little room for brilliant generalisations. Being thoroughly and literally unpoetic, it will make dull reading. Yet it is thoroughly and splendidly scientific; for it is not the business of the science of aesthetics to construct fascinating hypotheses inspired by the mind's innate love of order and completeness but rather to examine the elusive realities of art with the caution and detachment of true speculation in order to determine, as far as possible, their causes and the laws which govern them.

Nor must we fall into the error of supposing that the dryness and apparent inadequacy of Aristotle's treatment of poetry is the effect of a dry and unpoetic nature unable to appreciate the beauty and power of the works it is studying. True scientific detachment, let it never be forgotten, holds itself at a distance from the object out of reverence for the object; it will never murder to dissect. Now, as we shall have occasion to explain later, poetry is a reality which simply is not susceptible of the kind of analysis applicable to processes of reasoning. This Aristotle admits implicitly by his steadfast adherence to an inductive attitude, and explicitly when he lets fall the remark that the power of metaphor is the one thing



that cannot be taught. He knows better than to seek to pry into the vitals of a work of art; and by his rigid detachment and persistent refusal to speak of the masterpieces of his day in any but the most general terms, he pays them the highest tribute possible, and gives ample proof of taste and feeling far more genuine than those of critics who think they are telling us something about a poem when they describe its emotional effect upon themselves.

The cornerstone of all Aristotelian aesthetics is of course the great doctrine of imitation, a theory which is not so simple as it looks and which has received varying interpretations. Since it is to be the basis of all our investigations, it would seem necessary to offer the reader some exposition of this doctrine as understood by us and, in view of the importance of the matter, to risk being tedious by making our presentation as thorough and orderly as the circumstances of an introduction will allow.

The *Poetics*, unless read with considerable penetration, does not seem to offer the means of arriving at an exact notion of what is meant by imitation. In it poetry is at first called imitation, then a little later is said to be a thing more universal and of graver import than history. Either statement may at first glance seem acceptable, as sufficiently in accord with average experience or implicit knowledge; but when the two are taken together, it is seen that they rest on a considerable substructure of thought which the student is apparently held able to work out for himself. The poet's imitation, it would seem, is not going to aim at the accuracy of history, but just how it should be understood is not clear from a mere contrasting of the two. The fact is that imitation and image are treacherous terms because they commonly bear a vague but too narrow acceptance which nobody takes the trouble to analyse, but which, if so analysed, would prove quite unjustifiable<sup>1</sup>; while our difficulty with Aristotle arises because he has penetrated to their actual basis and employs them in all the breadth of truth.

Fortunately, in the greatest of Aristotelians may be found carried out in sufficient detail the analysis which his master seems to have taken for granted. Under St. Thomas's guidance,<sup>2</sup> let us put aside for the moment all consideration of the fine arts and examine the simple notion of imitation as it might be exemplified anywhere, as by a reflection in water, let us say. It is obvious that every case of imitation involves two entities: the exemplar or original which is imitated, and that which does the imitating, or the image itself. These are linked together by some common feature which makes us say that one resembles the other. Regarding this common quality, there are two things to be noted: (1) it must be present unchanged in the two objects, or at least according to a due proportion such as is retained by an enlarged or reduced photograph; (2) it must be, not any sort of quality, but of such a type that it may stand as a sure sign of the nature and kind

<sup>1</sup> The absurdity of the notion of an exact copy has been well exposed by J. MARTAIN, *Art et Scolastique*, Paris 1927, p.295.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Ia*, q.35, a.1, c.; *ibid.*, q.93, a.1, c.; and, above all, *In I Sententiarum*, d.28, q.2, a.1.

of the original; thus, a mass of white clay may resemble a swan in color, size and weight, but it does not imitate one until it acquires a resemblance revelatory of the nature of this bird, such as its shape or figure. This second point deserves special attention, for it shows that not all similarities will give rise to an image but only such as are significant.

The requirement of a common attribute which is significant, and without which the image could not convey the original, leads us naturally to our next point: there must also be dependence of the image on the original. At first sight we may feel that dependence will inevitably be present whenever a common essential attribute is present. But such is not the case: two eggs, as in St. Augustine's example, or two leaves from the same oak, cannot be said to imitate each other; similarly, a child is not the image of its identical twin, although both may be images of their parents. In short, there must exist between the two objects the further relationship of prior and posterior, of origin and originated, the reason for this stipulation lying in the very nature of the image, which essentially represents another, that is, designates it, leads the mind towards it, as being that from which it is derived by way of expression. If, by independent right, without any such procession or origination, one object should happen to possess even a multitude of traits found also in another, none of these similarities would permit the intelligence to infer anything whatever about the other and, therefore, no matter how much the two manifestly had in common, there would be no true imitation.<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing requirement, that the image must somehow proceed as expression from the original, deserves particular attention because it is the ultimate measure fixing both extremes of the wide extension which the words image and imitation can bear. If there is dependence, resemblance according to even a single significant attribute will deserve the title of imitation as much as the most accurate copy, and perhaps more so indeed, if the copy has failed by allowing significant features to become lost in a mass of meaningless detail. Hence we can have images ranging all the way from the utter fidelity of the swan's reflection in the water to a representation of its mere movement, let us say, in a dance. At one extreme we need only stop short of a duplication without procession or dependence, as in leaves of the same kind of tree; at the other we need only exclude a similarity which has no significance, meaning one which, having no relation to the nature of the original, again does not permit us to see the image as derived from it. So that, when Aristotle speaks of poetry as imitation, he by no means obliges himself to think of it as a simple copying of reality; and when he makes his second statement that it is more universal than history, or goes on to observe that it conveys what may or should be, rather than what is, it should surely be clear which extreme in the genus imitation he considers poetry to approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Natural science seems to agree with this restriction of the term by applying the word mimicry rather than imitation to the curious instances of close resemblance between species found in the insect world.

With these simple principles established, it will now be possible to determine how the image has a peculiar fascination in itself and can become an instrument of such mighty power in the hands of the artist. The first thing we must note is that the image is not the original, yet in it we see the original; in other words, it says or speaks something other than itself; it is expression. Hence it is already on the plane of representation and belongs in the domain of knowledge. The act of knowing, it should be recalled, consists in somehow drawing the object into the mind; but since the object cannot be physically absorbed, the mind must embrace it by means of likenesses or concepts. Now the image, as a likeness which conveys, without being, its exemplar, has already a certain detachment and intelligibility which give it an affinity to the concept. But the curious fact is that, although the concept is purely and essentially a means of knowledge (by which the mind must of course function even when using an image), the intervention of an image, conveying the original and at the same time perceived in itself, procures a certain striking advantage over the concept which is implicitly stated by Aristotle when he remarks that we can take pleasure in imitations even of things hideous and repulsive in themselves, and gives as an example paintings of dead bodies. The point is that both concept as formal sign and image are expressions, both utter something other than themselves, (indeed the concept too is a kind of image), but with this crucial difference, that knowledge by means of the concept grasps only the original, whereas knowledge by means of the image grasps both original and image, seeing one and seeing the other in it. This dual aspect of knowledge through images is everywhere proved and illustrated by the experimental fact to which Aristotle appeals, namely, that no matter how much we may dislike the subject, we can still enjoy the imitation, if it be well done. Hence imitative expression can reveal evil and ugliness without rendering us subject to them. The consummate villainy of Iago does not mar our detachment and even gives pleasure; our experience of him is, not actual, but intellectual, implying an understanding of his character, whereby we seem to master its wickedness. Detachment, not from the original, but from conditions of the original, this is the secret principle responsible for the influence of the image upon the human mind, the principle which thus becomes the measure of the attractiveness of images whether natural or artificial, and the means of their exploitation by the power of art. Here is the reason why there is a charm in the movement of clouds across the surface of the pool not felt when they are beheld moving through the heavens; why a mere silhouette may give a pleasure not found in a photograph; and finally why the good poem or painting can exert a compulsion stronger than reality.

There are two chief respects in which the special advantage of the image manifests itself and may receive development or intensification in fine art. First of all, the condition of the original from which the image may most vividly set us free is that of apparent disorder and lack of meaning, "the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world." The image — and this is true even of those of nature — may reduce the

complexity of the exemplar by confining and organising disparate elements into an orderly whole which can be easily and quickly taken in. Expressed in any other form, such elements would require a tedious and elaborate chain of propositions which could only be attended to one at a time; whereas here the multiple is seized in a single form without division of the knower. There is thus a satisfaction and sense of completeness in learning through images which has no parallel in scientific investigation. We may also note in passing that such knowledge has an air of richness from the simple fact that the mind is carried towards the original by an agency valuable in itself, so that there is pleasure, both in knowledge and in the means of its acquisition.

But what is perhaps more important than its superior intelligibility is the dynamic or stimulating quality of this means of knowledge. The condition of the image being different from that of the original, yet with a relation of procession or dependence between the two, there are two poles in the contemplative act of the mind, and a movement to and fro from image to original which cannot of course be present in straightforward knowledge by concept. The image proceeds, and declares itself as proceeding; even the simple shadows and reflections of nature have the resulting air of activity, forever emerging from and expressing their original or, if taken in relation to ourselves, forever beckoning, pointing, urging the mind towards it; so that they have something unfinished and vital about them which is an invitation to thought. The reason for this special appeal lies in the constitution of the mind itself, which might be described as that of a learner, not a knower. Knowledge with us is inevitably a process, beginning with the known and passing to the unknown, and therefore, because of the very nature of our being, we have more gratification in learning than in knowing, in moving from dark to day, in feeling the delightful shock of the new. The image is forever stirring us up with its suggestion and promise, so that the mind, in contemplating it, has the impression of continually enjoying the charm of discovery. "The reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning — gathering the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so."<sup>1</sup>

There must finally be mentioned an attribute of images which is quite unrelated to the foregoing line of thought, although of immense importance, namely, that as far as man is concerned, they are always sensible. Hence they have a special effectiveness from a new point of view as being objects proportioned to the dual nature of our power of thought; we can feel as well as know them; or better, in them we can feel what we are knowing. Once more there may be seen here a superiority over knowledge by mere concept, which seems to engage only half, and the less real and vital half, of our being.

But those same relationships to mind and to reality which are responsible for its apparent advantages over the concept, also cause the image to

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<sup>1</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448b15.



be in other respects sadly inferior. Essentially intermediate, midway between mind and reality, it is never completely expressive of the object nor completely satisfying to the mind. That reason should esteem such an instrument of knowledge is clear proof of the inherent weakness of reason, which can envelop nothing it seeks to know but is doomed to an endless labor of abstraction, hacking away at the rock of truth and carrying it off in chips and fragments. An image of the truth can set us free from that weary toil, giving us knowledge immediate, rich and apparently inexhaustible. Our escape, unfortunately, is bought at the price of that which we seek; the value of the image depends on its untruth as well as its truth; on what it ignores and excludes as well as on what it retains; it has the charm of promise, but the promise can never be completely fulfilled. Similarly, by offering us a meaning that we can touch and see, the image will seem to reconcile our divided powers of knowledge; yet it can never strike the senses with the force of a real object of nature, nor penetrate the intelligence like a true scientific universal.

All the advantages of the image, already identifiable in some degree even in the images of nature, are of course given enormous development by the artist, whose statements have besides something even of the power of the concept itself in that "they are of the nature of universals."<sup>1</sup> The inevitable shortcomings of this medium of thought and expression must also, of course, accompany it wherever it is found, and therefore persist even in the loftiest works of art. One of the chief aims of this study will be to elaborate and apply such general statements.

A brief sketch of the biographical circumstances of Shelley's essay will perhaps be appreciated by those less familiar with the history of English literature. The *Defence of Poetry* as its name suggests, was not a work of simple speculation or scholarship but a direct reply to a satirical attack on poetry by a close friend, Thomas Love Peacock. The latter's essay, entitled *The Four Ages of Poetry*, appeared in the first number of a review, *Ollier's Literary Miscellany*, begun by Shelley's own publisher in 1820. *The Four Ages of Poetry* was in no sense a serious work, its author being a celebrated wit who was a sincere admirer of good poetry and who had in fact himself composed two or three volumes of dignified verse. But our poet seems to have been alarmed and disconcerted in spite of himself by the plausibility of its mocking arguments and to have immediately set about a reply. This was intended to comprise three instalments and to be published in the same review which Peacock had used. When circumstances made this impossible, it was sent for publication to *The Liberal*, a periodical edited by two of Shelley's friends, the brothers John and Leigh Hunt. John Hunt felt obliged to prepare the essay for press by removing most of the explicit references to the article by Peacock which it was attacking, since lapse of time and the circumstance of publication in a different review would render these mystifying to the general reader. Before it could appear, however, Shelley was drowned in 1822, and soon

<sup>1</sup> *Poetics*, 1451b7.



after, *The Liberal* came to an end. The MS then went back to his wife and was eventually published by her in a volume of his letters and papers in 1840.

The text now most generally known being that of John Hunt, in which nearly all the references to Peacock's attack have disappeared, there is a danger that in reading it we may remain unaware of the degree to which his friend's satire is present in Shelley's mind as he proceeds. An examination of *The Four Ages of Poetry* will show that nearly every important proposition in Shelley's essay finds there its corresponding accusation or denial, and the sting of Peacock's brilliant witticisms may also help to explain the zeal and excess in both doctrine and expression of which it is sometimes guilty. Besides that of Peacock, other influences were at work upon him; but to estimate these in detail would be a considerable task. It may be noted, however, that he was actually reading Plato's *Ion* while working at this essay, and his remarks on poetic inspiration plainly reflect those of Socrates on the same theme. He had also recently studied Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poesie*, and several of his phrases are almost plagiarisms from that work. Through Sidney we can again perceive the influence of Plato and also, of course, that of Aristotle himself.

#### I. REASON AND IMAGINATION: CONCEPT AND IMAGE

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced, and the latter as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to color them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. The one is the *τὸ συνιδέναι*, or the principle of synthesis, and has for its object those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *τὸ λογίζεσθαι*, or principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things simply as relations; considering thoughts not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Shelley's first paragraph offers us, in its pairs of antithetical clauses, a simultaneous description of the mental faculty which is a first cause of poetry and of that other "calculating faculty" which, as we shall see later, seems to be looked upon almost as its arch-enemy. From what has been said in our introduction concerning the necessity of experimental methods in the investigation of poetry, it should be clear that to make a beginning with the faculties of the mind is a reversal of what, in our judgement, would be the proper order to be followed. To the artist it may well seem justifiable to begin with the immediate consideration of how the mind works in the domain of art and outside it, since the internal experience of his own art is that which is most direct and vivid for him; but, for the rest of men it is not possible to achieve much reliable knowledge of the mental

powers responsible for poetry except after an examination of the processes and effects of these powers, so that a scientific treatise should deal with them last rather than first. The general statements found in this chapter will appear therefore neither as clear nor as convincing as it is hoped they will become later, when an increasing amount of evidence can be brought forward to support them.

It is to be noted that the opposed forces of reason and imagination are spoken of very indeterminately as "two classes of mental action," so that the imagination is clearly not just an image-making power, but an intellectual ability superior indeed to that we call reason, and to which Shelley will not hesitate to attribute, not only the achievements of the artist, but those of the true thinker in almost every field. There should be no difficulty in accepting such a division of our mental powers, since there is no reason why the term image may not be used of that which is formed by the intellect as well as of that which is formed by the internal sense and, more important still, since a power of perceiving similitudes, characteristic of the imagination as here understood, is what distinguishes the good mind from the inferior in every field. Without such a gift, it is difficult to see how the scientific thinker, for example, could achieve the relations and analogical concepts of speculative philosophy, or the inductions and hypotheses of natural science.

Reason, according to Shelley, takes up its ideas merely as tools and levers, concerning itself only with that element of their being whereby they may be employed to bring about a certain general result; whereas imagination esteems rather the value a thing has in itself. We might find a personification of reason in the general of an army to whom the common soldier is a mere cipher, "a lifeless algebraical representation"; whereas imagination triumphs in the dramatist or novelist who can transform the single soldier into a being of inexhaustible interest, an entire microcosm of human hopes and fears. Reason and prose are not interested in the attainment of a whole; they ignore the vital, inapprehensible reality, contenting themselves with those elements of it which are susceptible of abstraction, and which for that reason are universal, applicable to all cases, permitting us to fix relations and draw conclusions of constant validity. Hence the language of reason will always work towards an unobtrusive clarity, setting aside all that cannot be grasped and understood; while the language of poetry, springing from a desire to achieve wholeness of knowledge, will be inclined to sacrifice even intelligibility, twisting and shaping the means of communication, and even cultivating a certain vagueness in order to convey an impression possessing the vigor and richness of reality. Reason, as opposed to imagination in the sense in which imagination is here understood, surveys objects with a certain detachment, being concerned primarily with what they are apart from our consideration of them. It considers the relations between things "however produced," that is, quite objectively, disregarding their possible suitability or unsuitability to man. In true rational science the mind takes things as it finds them; it has no power whatever to influence the production of the relations which it beholds and it is in this

sense that how they are produced is none of its business. Reason does not deal with things as the poetic imagination deals with them; the object of the two powers may sometimes be materially the same; it can never be formally the same.

In contrast to the detachment of reason, imagination, while it may perhaps function as a purely contemplative power when serving philosophy or science, is clearly to be understood here as artistic and creative. It works upon objects "so as to color them with its own light," employing them as elements in a labor of reconstruction according to its own mode. These new compositions reveal within themselves a principle of integrity conferred upon them by the power which gave them being; it is to the imagination, therefore, that they owe such solidity as they possess; the very term of this quasi-creation lies and remains within the creative power; they are the poet's offspring. In this constructive activity reason does indeed come into play, although its role is suggested only in the bare phrase "as the instrument to the agent." For our own benefit we may amplify this hint by observing that at least simple factual knowledge will be obtained by the poet through reason and — what is far more important — that the end which moves him to work and constitutes his goal will be a proposition or theme, the result of inference; such inference being perhaps quite unconscious as far as the poet is concerned. Nevertheless it remains true that the entire direction of the creative process is contrary to the movement of reason: the task of the artist is one of urgent synthesis which can neither await nor heed the findings of the spirit of rational dissection; it attends to the persuasive similitudes rather than to the scientific differences in things, for in such similitudes lies that which makes possible the poetic architecture. These remarks, to be left for the present in this condition of vagueness and generality, may be summarised by recalling that the general subject under discussion has been the differences between reason and imagination, differences arising from the natural desire of man for completeness in his mode of knowing, and completeness in the object of his knowledge. To know by means of reason alone seems unsatisfying because the vitality and immediacy of sense have been lost, and this deficiency the creative imagination seeks to remedy by coloring thoughts with its own light and composing a new object for undivided contemplation. The second shortcoming of reason, that it can never seize the entire object, but rather seems obliged to take in only aspects of it in shadowy and fragmentary succession, is also countered by the poetic image, which offers the mind an object rich and varied, yet easily assimilated.

The problem of this opposition between reason and imagination might also be attacked by attempting to distinguish clearly the respective products of each, the rational concept and the poetic idea. Both may perhaps be termed similitudes, but the object of which they are the likeness is decidedly not the same. If we examine the rational concept, we see that it may well be considered a similitude, as the mental counterpart of some actual existing object; but, although partly formed by the knower and to some extent dependent, like the poetic image, on a power from within, it is the direct

and faithful likeness of a reality, formed and esteemed as such, and for this reason neither the rational concept nor the work of its formation really deserve to be called imitation. For those who "most properly do imitate," as Sidney says, catching the true significance of Aristotle's doctrine, "borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be: but range only, reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be or should be." This splendid statement is thoroughly supported by Shelley, as we have seen, who makes the findings of reason only the bare materials out of which the poet shall fabricate something new and better.<sup>1</sup>

It being manifest that the poetic image does not attempt to be a faithful likeness drawn from a real object, there is reason to inquire what it does imitate or, if imitativeness does not account for what it is principally, whether it deserves the title of image at all. The answer to this difficulty is by no means easy and had best be approached through two or three preliminary distinctions, which may at first seem over-simple, but which, we hope, will prove their value. The first element of the problem has been already identified as the real object, the historical Hamlet, let us say, and it can never be emphasized too strongly that the poet's interest in this object is only that of an architect in a stone-quarry; he has no intention of reproducing it, of teaching us anything about it, nor of allowing it to influence his plans except only in so far as any material must limit or obstruct the force which seeks to dominate it. He is obliged to use such material for the same reason that a speaker who wishes to convey an utterly new thought must yet employ a language we understand and words possessing a wealth of values and associations already existing in our minds; to this small extent, however, the image he will build is an imitation even of the material original or exemplar.

But it is characteristic of the poet that he is not content to take things as he finds them; if he were, he would express himself in the bald statements of prose or science. It is the divine consideration of "what should be" which draws him on to the task of creating the poetic Hamlet, an ideal character more intelligible, more profound and satisfying than the historical original could possibly be.

While not strictly relevant to our discussion, it is worth emphasizing that this universal tendency of art to turn away from the inadequacies of the real world and to seek something better is unintelligible unless we suppose in the artist some sort of vital faith in a true ideal perfection. At first glance our principle might seem verified in the case of a good many artists, but inapplicable to a host of others, whose work, though of undoubted genius, nevertheless reflects a spirit of pessimism or decadence. But an objection based on such grounds has no true force, serving, indeed, to confirm rather than to destroy the principle it appears to be attacking.

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<sup>1</sup> "I am reading *Anastasis*. One would think that Lord Byron had taken his idea of the last three cantos of *Don Juan* from this book. That, of course, has nothing to do with the merit of this latter, poetry having nothing to do with the invention of facts." To Mary Shelley, Aug. 11, 1821.



For, implicit in the cynicism or sensualism of such artists is at least a conviction of the desirability of the spiritual; their attitudes being quite unintelligible unless we suppose in them and in their public, not religious faith, of course, nor anything like it, but the sense of a standard of perfection toward which mankind inevitably strives and which, it may be noted in passing, probably accounts for the fact that works of despair or decadence never win a place among the great classics. There is no intention here of suggesting that this hope need be given definite formulation, or that men have any explicit notion of the ultimate perfection which serves them as a measure, as constant as it is vague, of the inadequacy of their own sphere of existence. In the phrase of St. Augustine, "Inasmuch as we cannot present it to our minds as it really is, we do not know it, but whatever image of it may be presented to our minds we reject, disown and condemn." So that our perception of this ideal, he describes as a "certain learned ignorance; . . . for assuredly, if it were utterly unknown it would not be desired, and on the other hand, if it were seen it would not have to be desired and sought for. . ."<sup>1</sup> Shelley himself, in a note to *Hellas*, makes a valuable pronouncement along these lines. After rejecting orthodox Christian theology as a solution for the problem of evil, he continues:

That there is a true solution of the riddle and that in our present state that solution is unattainable by us, are propositions which may be regarded as equally certain; meanwhile, as it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity, let him be permitted to have conjectured the condition of that futurity towards which we are impelled by an inextinguishable thirst for immortality.

What is important if we are to understand the nature of poetic imitation is to notice that this ideal perfection constitutes a second source from which the work of art draws its form. It is a second original, so to speak, an ineffable Hamlet towards which the artist's mind aspires just as inevitably as it turns away from the Hamlet of fact and history. Hence, the poetic idea stands in an intermediate position, as it were, deriving its being partly from the real, partly from the ideal. It is essential to note, furthermore, that of the loftier of these two extremes, the mind has no knowledge or experience; its condition being the object of conjecture, not of investigation; and hence there is no alternative for the poet except to speak of it in terms of the world in which we live. The inaccessibility of the ideal explains, on the one hand, why poetry is necessarily a figment of the mind, a dream and brainchild of man, and why, on the other hand we instinctively require that it reveal something of the solidity and probability of real life. No mere reproduction of an historical, inconsequential Hamlet will content us, but neither can we be persuaded of the possibility of perfect man unless there is set before us a living image of that conjectural personage, rendered solid and convincing by expression in terms of all the details and circumstances of life. Because of the limitations of his medium and because of our insuperable ignorance and his, the poet, therefore, does not and cannot

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<sup>1</sup> *Ep. CXXX*, xiv, 27; xv, 28.



convey the ideal itself; it is always something less than that which he gives us, something better than reality yet falling short of the perfection towards which it points.

Returning to our original inquiry as to how the poetic idea deserves the title of image or similitude, it should now be clear that, as compared with the concept, it is both more and less of an image than the latter. Like the concept, it has an original, although an original not easy to describe, since it is neither pure fact nor pure fancy. If poetic idea and concept be judged on the basis of fidelity to their respective originals, the poetic idea is plainly inferior as a likeness, since it attracts attention and esteem to itself, inclining us to become careless of the original. But a second characteristic of the image requires that it should not share in the nature of that which it conveys and, in this respect, the artist's construction is more truly an image than the concept, since his idea is not merely associated, but identified, with a sensible form, and is therefore more fully detached from that which it expresses.

## II. ORIGIN OF POETIC EXPRESSION

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the imagination'; and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in a lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds and motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre. A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflection of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are what poetry is to higher objects. The savage (for the savage is to ages what the child is to years) expresses the emotions produced in him by surrounding objects in a similar manner; and language and gesture, together with plastic or pictorial imitation, become the image of the combined effect of those objects and his apprehension of them. Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expression; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony. The social sympathies, or those laws from which, as from its elements, society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings co-exist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind. Hence men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions, distinct from that of the objects and the impressions represented by them, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds. But let us

dismiss those more general considerations which might involve an inquiry into the principles of society itself, and restrict our view to the manner in which the imagination is expressed upon its forms.

In at least the higher animals, the outward manifestation of inner, conscious activity is fundamentally spontaneous and unreasoning. In such a statement, however, there is no clue to the true nature of expression, because it does not tell us why such outward manifestation need exist at all, nor why it seems not merely a relief but even a fulfilment demanded by the very nature of the sentient creature.

An angelic being might sing to itself in spiritual and wordless delight, but no such self-contained utterance could suffice the creature with animal nature. For the latter, any feeling of joy or pain, whether it result from sensation or from the loftiest thought, is inevitably linked with passion and with a stirring of the body which, when intense, must break forth in some sort of physical overflow, like steam from a boiling kettle.<sup>1</sup> This elementary principle will probably account for the most obscure and primitive kinds of expression, simple sounds and movements indicative of pain, anger, or pleasure; but if we take expression as necessarily implying the higher aspect of communication, then such basic manifestations of sense-life are still not true expressions for they have no social quality.

For the true and profound cause of expression in the formal sense, we must consider the nature of man as endowed with both external sense and power of reason. By the very law of his being which requires that any knowledge he gains must come to him through the senses, he can never be content with any object known until he can somehow reach it with his senses. Accordingly, the natural motive underlying all formal expression is the desire to render some thought or feeling a more vivid object of knowledge, whether for self or others, by actually embodying it in, or relating it to, a form that can be heard, seen, or felt.

An emotional assent to the proposition just enunciated is readily granted, for we all know how desirable a support to our thinking is furnished by visible formulation of it in diagrams or pictures<sup>2</sup>; but the obviousness of our doctrine is more apparent than real and some investigation of it is necessary. The essentially human inclination to seek support for our knowledge by finding for it a sensible form has its basic cause in the weak and disjointed condition of the mind. For, although relatively to other animals, man may appear enormously superior in cognitive power, it is yet not difficult for him to admit of intellectual natures far superior to his own. First, it is plain that the inevitable labor and indirection of discursive reasoning are handicaps from which a superior being might be

<sup>1</sup> Indeed retention of the emotion will intensify it, as ST. THOMAS observes, (*Ia IIae*, q.38, a.2, c.) and he suggests this as one of the reasons for the special attractiveness of the forbidden fruit (*Ad Romanos*, VI, c.v, 20).

<sup>2</sup> *Humana cognitio potentior est circa sensibilia*, remarks ST. THOMAS (*IIa IIae*, q.49, a.1, ad 2.), while giving some sound advice on the training of memory. He recommends the association of thoughts we wish to retain with sensible similitudes of some kind and preferably with such as are strange and striking, so that by this means a permanent impression may be left in the mind.

entirely free, just as better intellects among men seem less subject to them than others. To embrace the truth in one splendid effortless act would be the ideal for an intellectual power, an ideal forever inaccessible to the human mind in the natural order, because it is fated to be in some sort a house divided against itself. In its debility it demands a great number of faculties, revealing its inferiority already in this need for several tools to accomplish what might be achieved by one. Furthermore, the melancholy fate of the mind is to be obliged to feed its highest faculties with what scraps it can garner through its lowest; for, not only is there a distinct hierarchy in its powers, — the external and internal senses being vastly inferior in rank to the intellectual faculties — but it is upon the baser functions that it is thoroughly and ultimately dependent; the certitude of all our knowledge being measured by the certitude of the most primitive form of it. It follows that, although the objects attained by sensation are the most inferior, the knowledge of them is from one standpoint the most perfect, being at once that to which we are most proportioned by nature and that most comparable to infallible angelic intuition.

Our house, then, is not merely divided, but divided against itself, with two factions forever drawing it in opposite directions: the higher, towards objects more excellent in nature, and towards that simplicity of intellect which alone could be proportioned to such objects; the lower, towards realities obscure and inferior in themselves, yet grasped with a certitude and directness enjoyed nowhere else. To pursue the loftier realities, the mind must turn within, thus abandoning the world of sense and that precious immediateness and certainty which sense alone can give; for, just as a printed page is unreadable when held too close to the eye, so concepts within the mind suffer from what might be called a lack of thereness which makes them elusive and ungrateful objects of study. The central proposition of our discussion now follows, namely, that it is natural and inevitable that reason should attempt to set before itself these higher and more abstract realities, conferring upon them that appearance of objectivity which they lack, in an effort to attain them as sense attains the things of sense. For beings constituted like ourselves, this will mean giving them somehow or other a sensible form.<sup>1</sup>

The poetic universe responds, therefore, to a natural desire to reconcile the two opposing tendencies by a fusion in some fashion of sense and intel-

<sup>1</sup> The whole matter might be looked at from the other direction (that of the object). True philosophy does not permit us to consider the object of human knowledge to be sensible things merely as sensible, nor platonic essences remote from sense, but rather the natures or quiddities of sensible things. The object of man's knowledge being the intelligible universal in the particular sensible, it is to be expected that his power of knowledge will be proportioned to it and, accordingly, that it will be an intellect wedded to sense, unable to think without phantasms and, what is to the point here, the better able to think the more it turns to the phantasm. "*Unde natura lapidis, vel cujuscumque materialis rei, cognosci non potest complete et vere nisi secundum quod cognoscitur ut in particulari existens* (because that is its nature — to exist in a particular): *particulare autem apprehendimus per sensum et imaginationem.*" And this is why, as St. THOMAS has already observed, every man tries to form images of whatever he is seeking to understand, "*in quibus quasi inspicat, quod intelligere studet*" — a phrase which brilliantly conveys the grounds for the special pleasure found in the contemplation of a work of art (Cf. *Ia*, q.84, a.7, c.).

lect, through the creation of an object in which we shall be able to apprehend the universal with the directness of simple sensation. It is an attempt by man, and in some measure a successful one, to have his cake and eat it too: to enjoy the result of his power of intellectual abstraction without the sacrifice of sensation which it normally entails. By a construction of the mind, opposed elements are brought together and the resulting poetic object is therefore hybrid in character. The term hybrid here, aside from its association with living things, is probably the very best possible and should be taken quite literally. What it means is that the product of this union, while able to exist in its own right, will not belong to the species of either parent; it will not be reducible either to an abstract nature nor to an object of sense; we will be able neither fully to understand it nor fully to feel it. But our nature is hybrid too, in a way, and so it becomes something vitally human for us, something not merely able to satisfy us as nothing else can, but even to arouse all that is best in us. For poetry on the one hand calls us away from an illusory idealism and restores us to

...the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us, — the place where in the end  
We find our happiness or not at all.

and at the same time offers us a foretaste, a glimpse, of that celestial abode where we shall

...feel, who have laid our groping hands away;  
And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.<sup>1</sup>

To return now to the passage in Shelley which has prompted these observations: it is impossible not to admire the unerring poetic sense which has led him to assign to his art a cause partly natural and partly artificial. Besides the passive and inevitable response to external influences whereby man emits expression as the Aeolian lyre answers to the impulse of the wind, there is that "principle within the human being" which can achieve "an internal adjustment" of thought and feeling. And he has done well in choosing the example of the child dancing and singing for joy; for there both principles are plainly at work, the mere physical disturbance entailed by keen emotion, and the desire of the child to feel the delight it is feeling, to touch and see its own joy by the skipping of its feet and the laughter of its voice.

"In relation to the objects which delight the child, these expressions are what poetry is to higher objects." Poetry, Shelley implies, is not merely connate with the origin of man in the sense that it comes into being with the foundation of even the most primitive community, but also in showing itself very early in the life of the individual. Poetry is not some high intellectual attainment, the final flowering of the educated and civilised spirit; it is something "felt in the blood, and felt along the heart," an activity founded in an urge profoundly natural, and the more difficult to fix and determine because of its essentially dual aspect. His investigation of

<sup>1</sup> RUPERT BROOKE, *Sonnet* (Suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research). (By kind permission of Dodd, Mead and Co. Canada, Ltd.)



its primal source, while on the right track, does not seem to go far enough, perhaps because it considers expression as imitation before accounting for it as mere fact. The ultimate generative force which accounts for poetry must be sought in that deep desire of the mind, not merely for true knowledge, but for knowledge in a form as objective and satisfying as the stones by the wayside. Mere knowledge will not do, however elevated in quality or irrefutable in certainty; the abstract world of pure science with its inhuman perfection seems permanently inadequate for creatures of sense; and those among us who are most human, the poets, being moved most irresistibly by this natural longing for satisfying knowledge, will not be content with anything known until they have made it over again in their own way, giving it a form that can be seen and felt. The image, therefore, is not a mere instrument for the poet, but a thing desired and sought for itself. It is essentially the poetic idea, knowledge incarnate in a certain sensible form, in contrast to the idea of science which can attach itself to this form or that. A poet's ideas simply are not until they are singing within him; they have no shape anterior to their expression and hence their form of expression is inevitable.

Still another reason for the impulse towards art is suggested by our author when he describes the child as seeking to prolong, through sensible manifestation of its pleasure, its own consciousness of the cause of that pleasure. Although no attempt is made to exploit this idea, it seems to deserve more than mere mention, for it illustrates again how poetry, although occasioned by the animal side of human nature, rises to the intellectual plane. It is scarcely necessary to point out that, whereas a child may prolong its physical reception or physical manifestation of pleasure merely in order to continue the actual sensation it is enjoying, the poet's desire to give permanence to his experience is on a quite different level. No poem on falling in love, surely, is written in order that its author may endure the actual sensations of that experience over and over; the stability and duration which it is sought to confer on the event have, in this case, an ideal quality, as is made clear by the fact that the same immortality will be desired for moments of profound grief or despair. Obviously, it is as the voice of an intellectual being that poetry manifests this inclination, of a being capable of apprehending and desiring the universal, and which is seeking to raise its life and feelings to a sphere where they will no longer be the prey of time and change, while retaining for them all the charm and power of sensible expression.

In the concluding section of this paragraph Shelley emphasizes again how essentially human a thing is poetry. Even in the infancy of society the order which it observes is "distinct from that of the objects and impressions represented . . . all expression being subject to the laws from which it proceeds." It is the order of human nature, then, which it seeks to represent, not the order of the external universe, — this being its great point of difference from science. Consequently, other things being equal, poetry cannot fail to improve as civilisation advances; for, as human nature becomes richer and more varied, so will artistic expression acquire a cor-



responding complexity; "an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expression." And, although at first sight this might not seem true, it will follow that even external nature will be more deeply known and appreciated by the civilised poet, for the reason that, having so much more which demands to be said, he must range farther and search more profoundly for adequate symbols and images. A comparison of typical passages from an early tribal masterpiece like *Beowulf* with a few lines from almost any great modern poet would offer a convincing illustration of this principle.

### III. CHIEFLY ON METAPHOR: ITS NATURE AND FUNCTION

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects. For there is a certain order or rhythm belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation, from which the hearer and the spectator receive an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other; the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste by modern writers. Every man, in the infancy of art, observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which this highest delight results; but the diversity is not sufficiently marked as that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists to excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from the community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world"—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem; the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the forms of the creations of poetry.

In this paragraph Shelley's thought seems to fall under three heads: first, he studies poetry in its origins and thereby arrives at a definition of beauty which carries with it a definition of the poet; next he deals with the poet's special mode of expression, which is by means of metaphor, and this in turn leads him to his final topic, the nature and origin of language.

His explanation of the progress of art from a primitive to a more highly developed condition is not so clear as it might be, but seems to rest on a basic principle which is suggested plainly enough. All forms of art are attempts at orderly expression; the primitive and original forms, however,

fall far below that perfect order more nearly realised by work of high culture. In short, an absolute harmony or order is taken as at least conceivable; in tribal or folk art this is present in a crude and inchoate form; in the works of advanced civilisation it finds a much greater perfection, the reason for the difference lying in the possession by the refined and mature intellect of a power of consciously discerning an "approximation to this order." Such ability to judge is taste, the confident knowledge that a work is, or is not, in close relation to ideal harmony; and, although by itself it may not make the poet, Shelley is unquestionably right in implying that taste is one of his indispensable gifts. The remark might be added that artistic judgment is at least more sure and deep in the poets themselves than in their critics or their public, as is proved by the innumerable instances of a bold disregard of contemporary judgment by great artists being confirmed by the more universal decision of posterity. Good taste, then, cannot be the simple effect of experience and cultivation but must imply some share in the native endowments of the poet.

We may now notice Shelley's definition of beauty which, although given only in a hasty parenthesis, reveals considerable profundity. From the context it is plain that an order is necessarily involved, that is, something calling for comprehension and making its primary appeal to intelligence. But the order in this case also causes pleasure of an intense and lofty kind, apart from which it might remain an order, exerting a purely intellectual appeal, but would never deserve to be termed beautiful. The beautiful, however, is now stated to be the actual relation between an intellectual delight and the object which causes it. How the relation itself could be beauty is not easy to see, but perhaps a parenthetical remark is being read too closely and its author should be taken to intend the more acceptable meaning that the beautiful is the object itself under a certain aspect, in other words, as related to pleasurable apprehension by the mind; the object is seen, not as the good, but as the true, causing instant pleasure by reason of its striking order.<sup>1</sup>

So far we may be fairly sure of having caught Shelley's mind on the nature of beauty; but a little later in this paragraph another statement is made which seems to obscure rather than clarify what he has said above: "To be a poet," he observes, "is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." Even grammatically this sentence is not unmistakably clear, it being uncertain whether the two final clauses are to be taken as each constituting a definition of both the true and the beautiful, or as two separate definitions, one of the true and the other of the beautiful. However we read these words, they remain difficult to reconcile with what has already been determined. A definition of the true as the relation subsisting between

<sup>1</sup> All of which would appear in close enough accord with the remarks of St. THOMAS: *Pulchrum addit supra bonum quemdam ordinem ad vim cognoscitivam; ita quod bonum dicatur id quod simpliciter complacet appetitui; pulchrum autem dicatur id cujus ipsa apprehensio placet.* — *Ia IIae*, q.27, a.1, ad 3.

existence and perception is by no means out of the question; but a definition of either the true or the beautiful as the relation between perception and expression seems quite baffling in this context, since it implies an entirely new point of departure.<sup>1</sup>

The really important ideas of this paragraph are found in its second half, which treats of the nature and necessity of metaphor in poetry and of its share in the creation of language. Here Shelley reveals a deep insight into the causes of his art, suggesting far more than he says. Our duty will be to attempt to expose the principles underlying his observations so as to make it possible to bridge gaps which his mind seems to cross intuitively and without effort.

"Their language is vitally metaphorical." In the phrase itself a metaphor is implied which, upon analysis, might tell us that metaphor is not only the necessary, but the natural, means of expression for poets and, as founded in nature itself, can impart the life and force of nature to their utterance. To understand how this is so we may recall what has been said already concerning the origin of human expression. The pressure of passion demands an outlet; but, in the rational animal, expression must answer to the requirements of a dual nature and hence cannot remain on the obscure level of sense. The utterance that man requires must bring relief to spirit as well as to flesh, by translating passion into a more orderly and intelligent form. The true speech of mankind, then, will be neither of sense alone nor of intellect alone and will find its adequate vehicle only in the image, the sole instrument whereby meaning can be given sensible form and the two powers drawn to its undivided contemplation. "Strong passion," Shelley remarks in a letter, "expresses itself in metaphor borrowed from all objects alike remote or near, and casts over all the shadow of its own greatness."<sup>2</sup>

Its appeal as a vividly sensible object is, accordingly, a basic reason for the effectiveness of metaphor; so that to speak of an abstract metaphor or poetry would not even be intelligible. This point is strikingly illustrated in the work of Shelley himself, who, although famous for his devotion to abstract ideas, and although appearing at times to cultivate an unsubstantial and rarefied style out of a desire to spiritualize his message as much as possible, nevertheless constantly bears witness to the inevitable inclination

<sup>1</sup> Certain citations might be made to show that SHELLEY does not possess his own thought too clearly: In notes surviving from the rough draft of this portion of the essay he gives evidence of uncertainty as to the relation of the true and the beautiful: "It is by no means indisputable that what is true, or rather that which the disciples of a certain mechanical and superficial philosophy call true, is more excellent than the beautiful." — *Peacock's Four Ages*, etc., (ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith), p. 87. Again, in another passage of *The Defence*, where he is apparently describing the creative process, he says: "The imagination, beholding the beauty of this order, created it out of itself according to its own idea;..." whence it would seem the "order" is perceived as beautiful before any expression of it takes place. But it is possible too that he has in mind some quite profound theory whereby, to use scholastic language, the object has splendor and significance, not in the *species impressa*, but only in the *species expressa*. Translated into the language of subjectivism, I suppose this view would become similar to that of CROCE.

<sup>2</sup> To Leigh Hunt, Livorno, Aug. 15, 1819.

of the poetic mind to give tangible and visible semblance to its conceptions. In the preface to *Prometheus* he invites us to note that the imagery to be employed "will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind," but a glance at almost any section of the poem will reveal that what the poet actually does is to draw from the world of the senses a powerful imagery with which to render vivid the operations of mind. Here is a characteristic line,

...the thought

That pierces the dim universe like light.

And the true direction of his tactics is manifest in the splendid passage:

Hark! the rushing snow!

The sun-awakened avalanche! whose mass,

Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there

Flake after flake, in heaven-defying minds

As thought by thought is piled, till some great truth

Is loosened, and the nations echo round,

Shaken to their roots, as do the mountains now.

Sometimes, to be sure, his images are chosen with such subtle taste and presented so unobtrusively as to deceive us for a moment into thinking he has caused the invisible influence of an ideal to flow directly into our minds:

Common as light is love,

And its familiar voice wearies not ever.

But a second glance is all that is required to reveal that the abstract now exerts force simply because it has been made visible and audible.

Such citations are hardly needed to establish a point so indisputable but they are worth making if only in order that we may have some actual metaphors before our eyes as we pursue this discussion. A treatise on the nature of poetry can hardly sin by excess of quotation: good science should be reluctant to relinquish its hold on the object and should turn to it frequently for confirmation or new direction. Studies in aesthetics which present themselves in close and solid pages of print, with never an opening in which poetry itself might be able to indicate a path to its own secrets, should be objects of suspicion. The position of the investigator in this field, as has already been suggested, is not a favorable one, and an accurate and humble regard for the facts is his only salvation.

In this spirit let us permit Shelley himself to lead us a step further by asking what is the reason for the gentle yet irresistible power of the final line quoted from him above. It is surely beyond a doubt that the images here are chiefly precious thanks to a new comprehension they bring, a new understanding of the depth and breadth of love. This is the second great principle to be noted in the study of metaphor: that, if we are inclined to reject metaphors lacking in appeal to sense, so also are we inclined to reject those which lack significance for intellect. "Every expression in a poem ought to be in itself an intelligible picture."<sup>1</sup> The natural object

<sup>1</sup> SHELLEY, to Thomas Medwin, Pisa, April 16, 1820.



to which the poet directs our eyes in forming his simile takes on force and value only when over it has been cast the shadow of great passion, that is, when it has been given new relevance to our life. Mere representation may excite admiration for its skill or fidelity, but can win only a detached and passing consideration. The line Tennyson is said to have called his best,

The mellow ouzel fluted in the elm

is a pretty little *tour de force*, stirring pleasantly the membrane of the ear, but simply trivial when set beside the utterances of really great art. For the genuine poet, the similitudes which count are those which bind natural to human things, similitudes which are true analogies and which because of this valid relationship can give meaning to human experience. Poetry is not pointless picture-making, nor a fanciful juxtaposition of natural and mental objects.

Four seasons fill the measure of the year:

There are four seasons in the mind of man:

declares Keats boldly, and there is neither falsehood nor superficiality in the poet speaking of a "winter of our discontent" or of a time of year for us "when yellow leaves, or few, or none, do hang upon the boughs..."

The metaphor, then, which may be thought of as the poem in miniature, stands, like it, midway between the mind and an original, in order to bring us a new understanding of the latter, and it is interesting to note how this fact can reconcile the apparently opposed tempers and inclinations of certain great artists, some of whom are inclined to take the real and familiar, others the imaginary and fanciful, as their point of departure. In either case great poetry may result, although in one instance the art has the effect of making everyday things seem new and significant, in the other that of giving to the remote and wondrous the reality of common daylight; or, in Shelley's beautiful language, poetry either "spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things." The most celebrated exemplification of this contrast is found, of course, in Coleridge and Wordsworth and is expressed by the former in the famous passage concerning the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>1</sup>

The observation by Lord Bacon, to which Shelley refers with approval, that the faculty of perceiving similitudes is "the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge," suggests another line of inquiry whereby we may catch a glimpse of the relation between poetry and science and at the same time see why Shelley is led to associate metaphor with the origin of language.

It may be recalled that the mere power of perceiving similitudes is common to all minds, those of higher order being distinguished from the rest simply by the possession of this power in an eminent degree. Merely to see a resemblance and to enjoy it, however, is not to form a metaphor. All the mind does at such times is to experience the gratification of beholding two things in one, so to speak; an achievement naturally delightful to intellect. It is this sort of pleasure even a child will feel upon finding

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Biographia Literaria*, chap. xiv.



that the potato on its plate has a grotesque resemblance to a human face. In one object two separate forms are apprehended, but no effort is made to identify them nor to turn this superficial likeness to a higher purpose.

Similitudes, in the form of parallel cases and comparable phenomena are also the concern of science. The grasping of these likenesses in the primitive stages of human experience leads to the genesis of those first principles upon which all reasoning must rely, and in this sense it is true that the faculty which perceives them becomes the source of axioms common to all knowledge. But the explicit and positive function of similitudes in scientific thinking is to make possible an argument from them to some common principle; for example, from the similarities observable in the behavior of man and the higher brutes it might be concluded that both have an internal faculty of imagination. But it is to be noted that in science only those resemblances are heeded which seem able to lead the mind to the attribution of a common nature. The medical man, called to attend the mayor of Hamelin, might possibly have observed that

Nor brighter was his eye, nor moister  
Than a too-long-opened oyster,

but would doubtless have put aside the comparison at once as having nothing in it to advance his purpose. Furthermore, even when he had fixed upon the similarities between this case and others which seemed to permit a diagnosis, he would be careful not to go beyond the evidence. His ultimate goal, as scientific thinker, being the objective truth, he would in all he did submit himself to the facts and distinguish carefully between the known and the conjectural.

In contrast to the humble servitude of the scientist the poet's freedom seems almost god-like, the secret of this freedom lying in the fact that his objective is not dictated to him by nature but is of his own choosing. For the poet does not inhabit a cosmos of which he is doomed to be the mere cautious and doubtful observer. His world is rather all

the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear, — both what they half-create  
And what perceive;

It is a universe which is not, of course, — as these lines indicate — wholly of his own fabrication. His vehicle of expression, the very medium of his art, for one thing, is something he must accept, with the limitations which it imposes; human nature also has its "unalterable forms" to which he must be loyal. Yet within these limits the infinity of intellect asserts itself and no bounds can be set to the different kinds of works the artist may choose to undertake. Even in the arts nearest to the useful, like that of architecture, for example, this vast indefiniteness is apparent. In spite of the fact that he must work in materials few and intractable, and must serve such rigid human ends, who will venture to predict all the possible varieties of structures of which the architect is capable? As for the poet, whose art is the highest and most intellectual, and whose

medium the most plastic of all, his freedom is such that it is small wonder he is sometimes deceived into thinking his own the most exalted of human pursuits.<sup>1</sup>

Since it is carried on in view of a goal or purpose freely chosen, the artistic consideration of a similitude will not be bound to a scientific regard for fact. The poet will point to likenesses or even make outright identifications simply as it suits his end; that end being, as we have seen, the expression of some phase or aspect of the limitless stress and surge of human passion. The language employed will be that of metaphor and image, as most proportioned to human nature, but the poet's choice of similitudes will be governed by the single consideration of their suitability for the purpose he has in view; and hence he may disregard the degree to which they are based in fact and may thus gather them "from all objects, alike remote or near." We may sometimes think, upon meeting with a poor metaphor, that the ground for our disfavor is an improbability with reference to fact; but such is really not the case. If the similitude represented had contributed forcefully to the artist's purpose, any improbability in it would have passed without comment. We cannot enjoy the incompatible mixture of images in the following:

...his snow-white brows  
Went arching up, and like two magic ploughs  
Furrow'd deep wrinkles in his forehead large,  
Which kept as fixedly as rocky marge;

But if the effect is grotesque and unpleasing, it is not because the objects concerned are never found together in nature, but simply because they have not been made to come together by the art of the poet in support of a single artistic effect.

Her skin was like the grape  
Whose veins run snow instead of wine,  
brings together elements at least as unlikely but achieves a union of them in one brilliant result.

It should be plain now what relation exists between the poet as creator of metaphor and as creator of language itself. The breadth of his glance, "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven," and the quasi-infinity of his subject-matter, which is human conduct in all its endless variability and subjection to the accidents of fortune, are such that the poet's message must be unique; for no two minds could possibly share, much less express, precisely the same poetic experience.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore "the forms of things unknown" which his imagination seeks to "body forth" and so it follows that his language must be not only vitally metaphorical, but vitally original; he not merely is permitted to choose his metaphors from far and near but is compelled to find such as have never been used before. Hence the tend-

<sup>1</sup> "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosopher and Experimentalist would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again."—BLAKE.

<sup>2</sup> See below, chap. V, p.154, for further discussion of this point.

ency seen in so many great artists to escape somehow from the limitations of conventional speech, either by an attempt to recover the artless and effective form which the language possessed in its origins, or by elaborating a new and highly personal diction — the latter tendency finding extreme form in writers like Milton or James Joyce, whom a modern critic recently compared as both having used a language "based on English." This natural urge to give new force and freshness to speech by the discovery of metaphors can be pursued in cruder fashion by the community as a whole, as Shelley suggests when he states that "Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem," and it may perhaps be conceded that the vast majority of our words, even though no longer possessing a metaphorical value, originated in this way.

But we are not obliged to follow him in maintaining that words which have lost their figurative value and those which, as the arbitrary symbols of reason, have never had it, are thereby "unfit for all the nobler purposes of human intercourse." The statements of philosophy may appear cold indeed when set beside the vital utterance of poetry, but it must be remembered that the infinite variety of the latter is owing to the nature of its object, which is below the level of the intelligence. The philosopher, in Blake's epigram, is likened to the dog which lets go of the bone to grasp at its shadow in the brook only to lose both; while the poet is content to hold firmly to the reality. But the truth is that neither the one nor the other ever have their hands on it: more properly the poet might be compared to a man tasting some exotic fruit and attempting to tell us what it is; the best he can manage is to say what it is like; that it resembles this and reminds him of that and so on interminably, each new comparison a delightful hint of the nature of the reality but never actually attaining it, for the reason that it is a sensation and not wholly communicable. The scientific thinker has really seized upon something and has made it his own; hence he can tell us in fixed and final terms what he understands. Unfortunately, although his concept may be irrefutably true, it too is partial and unsatisfying, at least for the vast majority of men. We shall have occasion later to treat more precisely of the relative dignity of poetry and speculative science, but for the present it should be clear that, while the terminology of the latter may be abstract and bloodless, in this domain no other is possible, and, if the value of language rest in its power of conveying truth, the discourse in which this serves cannot be considered among the less noble of human enterprises.

#### IV. POETIC INTUITION

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and, like Janus, have a double face of false and true. Poets,

according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets; a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events; such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons, and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry; and the choruses of Aeschylus, and the Book of Job, and Dante's Paradise, would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did not forbid citation. The creations of music, sculpture, and painting are illustrations still more decisive.

Up to the present Shelley may be interpreted as using the term poet in a general sense to designate the creative worker in any branch of the fine arts. Now, for the first time, he makes the claim, so often repeated in this essay, that to the poet must go the credit for every human achievement requiring creative thought. In the present paragraph, however, this view is boldly offered as a necessary assumption with no attempt at explanation or defence. He will assert this doctrine again more than once, sometimes with an explanatory remark or two, but never offers anything like a reasoned discussion of it until much later in his essay. Examples like this, of a lack of orderly development in the poet's thought, make things difficult for anyone who would like to carry out a thorough study of his work without appearing to pull it to pieces. Our best plan in this case will be to put off consideration of the problems raised by this radical claim until his more explicit statement of it shall have been reached.

His observations on the relation of poetry to religion are worth a glance if only because they suggest once more a principle often invoked in our discussion, namely, that any object of thought which is impossible or very difficult for man to apprehend, whether it be obscure of itself or "dark with its own exceeding brightness," will invite expression through metaphor or allegory. Things invisible to mortal sight can be suggested to our minds only through being likened to that of which we have some experience. The task of creating such similes is, in Shelley's opinion, the office of the poet, who thereby causes a form of religion to come into being, with its superficial and misleading message for the vulgar, who grasp only the literal meaning of the myth, and its more profound, if exceedingly mysterious, significance for the enlightened.

With some trepidation we now approach the observations on the poet as legislator and prophet, which introduce a problem of notorious difficulty, namely, the nature and value of poetic knowledge. The statements found here offer additional trouble again because of an awkward context, since they seem to presuppose the splendid praises of poetic intuition found in the last pages of Shelley's work, the point being that the merits of poetic knowledge cannot be appreciated until something is known of the manner in which it is achieved. Here he makes the claim that, through his art,



the poet is able to reach universal truth, and therefore fully deserves the titles of prophet and legislator which were granted to him in ancient times; but it seems of little use to ask whether a poet's conclusions are reliable before considering how they have been reached, although we must look much farther on in Shelley's essay to learn what he has to say on this point. In the present chapter, therefore, we will first try to understand a little how the poetic mind works, making use of the later passages from our author to which we have just referred, and after that we may inquire whether this process of the imagination can be trusted as we trust a process of scientific reasoning. Our general conclusion will be that it is in this very creative process of the artistic mind that art most imitates nature and, because of the naturalness of its special mode of consideration, enjoys a certain advantage over science, which relies upon deliberate calculation. However rare the true poetic mood, it is nevertheless the most normal and natural to man, since it calls into play all his faculties and answers to the needs of his whole nature. The conclusions towards which he is guided in this mental state may be unaccountable, but they deserve confidence none the less, the same acceptance we grant to the mysterious achievements of nature.

We may first note briefly the value Shelley here assigns to poetic insight. The poet, he declares, knows the present state of things far better than the rest of men. His knowledge is not that of science or erudition; it is rather of a contemplative nature: he "beholds the present as it is." By such power of vision he becomes first a legislator, able to discern the existing causes of disorder and to prescribe reforms; then, like the doctor who, from the actual condition of the patient, can predict death or recovery, the poet, in contemporary conditions, is able to read the symptoms of what is to come and hence has foreknowledge of the future. Nothing miraculous is implied in this foresight; it would seem to be simply the extension of a natural endowment of the poetic mind. However, a final remark, apparently designed to give its ultimate cause, declares that the poet "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one" — a phrase which, if found by itself, would seem a pretension to quasi-mystical privilege.

That the poet enjoys a special power of perception of some kind can hardly be the subject of controversy. Nevertheless, our author so often indulges in hyperbole in such matters, that it might be well at least to remark that the evidence is not entirely on one side. Some sadly misguided predictions have been made by great artists, the case nearest to hand, and an especially pathetic one to our twentieth-century mind, being that of Shelley himself, who led his fellow-Romantics in faith in human goodness and in a confident hope of progress. But it is perhaps misleading to relate the poetic vision exclusively to political and social affairs, as Shelley's humanitarianism inclines him to do. In spite of certain striking examples of political perspicacity and foresight in poets like Wordsworth and Heine, it is probably unfair to expect the artist's special insight to prove itself in matters not closely related to his work, it being rather in the domain of art itself that we should look for more numerous and more

rewarding instances of the mysterious faculty in question. This power may be described as a swift, effortless grasp of experience and an unerring interpretation of it. Great portrait painters, for example, in a ten-minute sketch, seem able to convey a perception of character which friends of the subject may have reached only after long intimacy. Again, within the brief limits of a novel or play a writer will sometimes display an understanding of national character, of a land and its people, which neither the reading of volumes of history nor a long sojourn in the country might enable us to equal. And what lesser genius does for a given place or period, the greatest, in epic and tragedy, can achieve for the whole of humanity resident in the universe. How is it, then, that without research or investigation, while still perhaps young in years, and without apparent effort, nor proportionate expenditure of time, the artist can produce interpretations so profound and permanent?

Whatever the ultimate secret of this power, there is manifestly something unconscious and natural about it. The precision and truth of the masterpiece are not won by a process of calculation and test. In Shelley's words, "A great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process." The artist seems to be right as nature herself is right, and we must turn in this direction for further light on a difficult problem. The inerrancy of nature is one of her most vivid characteristics: the life of plants and animals, for example, though obscure and limited, is clearly in sympathy with the vast scheme of things and leaves little room for mistake. The plant does not misapprehend the direction of the light; the lowest of brutes recognizes its food or offspring with relative infallibility. This sure movement towards the good can scarcely be understood, or even spoken of, except by assuming that such creatures do not guide themselves, but are in the grip of forces which participate somehow in the nature of intelligence, and by which they are urged on to the goal of their own welfare. That nature acts for an end is a proposition little in favor nowadays, when our science of nature has become so cut off from the overwhelming mass of immediate and natural evidence which supports her apparent purposefulness. It is obviously impossible to enter into a full discussion of the question here, but let it at least be suggested that, if we are to account for an attribute of poetry, a human art, we must move into the poet's own world. Mechanical and material causes do not go far towards explaining the vital processes even of mere biology; and the application of them to problems of the moral and intellectual life of man will advance us still less. After all our emotions, hopes and aims have been reduced to combinations of chemicals and electrical impulses, poetry will continue to be written, and to demand explanation:

To the child, the sea is angry, for it roars;  
Frost bites, else why the tooth-like fret on face?  
Man makes acoustics deal with the sea's wrath,  
Explains the choppy cheek by chymic law, —

To both, remains one and the same effect  
On drum of ear and root of nose, change cause  
Never so thoroughly: so our heart be struck,  
What care I, —

Now the difficulty with which we are dealing consists in this: that, while poetry is the activity of a being capable of deliberation, and is consciously carried on, it possesses an inevitability and sureness akin to those of natural processes and not present in the same degree in human actions which are more wilful. If the apparently purposeful yet unself-conscious movement of nature can help us better to understand these properties of art, it should be worth while to consider what parallel it has in human life.

Because of its untroubled sureness, irrational life has always had a certain enviable superiority in the eyes of man which has inclined even philosophers at times to seek in that quarter the antidote for restlessness of the spirit. What suits our purpose is merely to note that man himself in certain circumstances can attain, or better, slip back, into something like it; the most vivid instance, perhaps, being the state of dream. The word has no sooner been uttered than it calls to mind a good deal of familiar evidence; this strange state having been used metaphorically by a host of poets to describe their power of vision or its effects. Like dream, the poetic mood seems not to be enjoyed at will; it is rather something which comes over the poet, "arising unforeseen and departing unbidden." Similarly the two are transient and unstable in character. But, in spite of these defects, and although in dream particularly the mind appears to have sunk into a condition where it is played upon by influences which it cannot rationalise nor control, in both instances there is enjoyed an extraordinary vividness of perception not known at any other time, and also — although this is far more rare and uncertain in dream — a special insight which deliberate mental processes cannot achieve. Nor need we go beyond our normal waking life to find impressions of an unaccountable sort, held with great sureness, yet arrived at almost unconsciously by processes resembling those of nature and dimly suggestive of the high poetic vision. Our intimate understanding of the character of friends, of our own country or countryside; the confident knowledge of those who have spent their lives close to nature in the care or pursuit of living things; even the acquisition of good taste in art, as we saw above; all these forms of knowledge represent the assimilation of experience by gradual and unconscious means, which finally achieves what might be called a sure feel of things, rather than a reasoned conviction about them.

But of course poetic contemplation is only remotely comparable to actual dreaming, being on a far higher and more truly human plane, and is immensely more sensitive, quick and penetrating than the kind of intuitive perceptions shared by the common run of mankind. The poet seems to have the special privilege of a mood wherein mind and body are permitted to function as one, in an harmonious and effortless union which supposes the relaxation of the control of reason and the achievement of a "wise passiveness." Swiftly and vividly by this gift he can do what the

rest of us achieve obscurely and hesitantly over the years — embrace and assimilate a vast amount of experience, seizing it in its entirety, without selection, prejudgment or wilful design, in order to give it intelligible expression. His thinking seems to take its direction from nature herself, moving irresistibly towards its goal as do irrational things towards their proper ends, under an impulse that is part of the vast impulse of the universe. The artist may well be said to imitate nature, then; he imitates her because he cannot help it. In how deep a sense such imitation is to be understood is revealed in the words of St. Thomas:

For if an instructor in some art carry through a work, the pupil who would acquire the art from him ought to attend to that work of his in order that he himself may proceed in the same fashion. And accordingly the intellect of man which derives its intellectual light from the divine intellect, must of necessity in that which it fashions be formed through contemplation of things made by nature, in order that it may operate in the same manner. Whence the Philosopher declares that if art might work the things of nature, art would manage them just as nature does; and, conversely, if nature might fabricate the things of art, she would proceed just as art does.<sup>1</sup>

In this extraordinary passage, we should note how the language emphasizes the nature of art as a dynamic and vital process, and how plainly it represents the artist, not as attempting to duplicate one of nature's finished products, but as learning to function like nature, to proceed as nature does in the formation even of those things which she cannot make. As St. Thomas remarks elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> "if artificial things, like a house, were made by nature, they would be made according to that order in which they are now made by art." This is the basic principle, then, to which we are seeking to add, with Shelley's help, certain additional propositions not all so readily acceptable. The first, which is really implicit in the statement by St. Thomas, is merely that true art must pre-suppose an intense and deep awareness of nature, a sense of her being and direction far beyond that of ordinary men. The next is that the actual power of imitating nature in the profound manner described has something passive and involuntary about it, so that it is neither to be acquired nor exercised at will. Finally there is the claim which instigated this discussion, that the knowledge which art may involve or produce has genuine universality and may well enable its possessor sometimes to read the future in the present.

Taking for granted that the poet must enjoy a certain deep communion with nature, that his blood must "beat in mystic sympathy with nature's ebb and flow,"<sup>3</sup> before he can imitate her in the manner referred to above, let us now ask why such power of feeling and entering into the life of things

<sup>1</sup> *In I Politicorum*, Prologus.

<sup>2</sup> *In II Physicorum*, lect.13, n.3. — In connection with these two citations, it may be noted that there are thus at least two distinct ways in which art is imitative of nature: The first and more profound is that according to which art proceeds as nature does, following a natural creative process. The second arises from the fact that the image must show a certain truth to nature, not the rigid adherence to fact of a scientific statement, of course, but a kind of sane acceptance of the universe as it stands, which prohibits us from calling poetry mere falsehood. In a second instalment of this article considerable space will be given to an explanation of the differences between art and science in their relations to nature, in the course of which the principle just enunciated will receive fuller support.

<sup>3</sup> *Alastor*, 1.651.



is the privilege of the few and is not to be acquired. The reason which seems most likely is that most men have not the extraordinary gifts of sense, or have them not in that delicate balance with those of intellect, by which the poet is characterised. They are either without unusual sensuous perception, or find themselves in this respect at one of two extremes: having so fallen victim to physical impulse that from certain points of view they no longer appear to act as rational beings; or having so dominated and thwarted the senses in the struggle of economic or political life, or in the interest of virtue, as to no longer give heed to anything for which they see no reason. Now, for the artist, it would seem inevitable that the sense-powers should be of the highest importance; for the human mind could scarcely learn to follow in its own workings the vital courses of nature without surrendering the arbitrary governance of reason and holding itself in readiness to catch, through the senses, her slightest sound or movement. We should notice carefully that this will not imply the submission of intellect to sense, but the submission of intellect to nature itself through sense; and it is so thorough-going in great poets that they are inclined to speak of themselves as losing their own identity in the process. Thus, by a strange coincidence, both Shelley and Keats compare the poet to a chameleon<sup>1</sup> and the latter makes also the striking observation: "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." And we catch some notion of how remote from average experience, how incredibly intense and alert, yet passive, are the poet's senses from the description found a little further in the same letter — "When I am in a room with people, if I ever am free from speculation on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated." In short, it is as if the poet had become nothing but an eye, being concerned neither to investigate nor alter, but merely to see, and having in himself lost all but an instrumental value. The achievement of this attitude, and above all the expression of its result, are not of course attributable so much to superior keenness of the external as of the internal senses; and it is by consideration of the special gifts of the poet in this latter respect that we may most vividly come to see that he must be born and not made. The enormous power of visual and auditory memory characteristic of great artists, their vast and vivid scope of imagination, their unerring practical judgment, are all so far above the capacity of average man as to seem mysterious and inexplicable; and it is the possession of such powers no doubt which renders a man susceptible to being caught and drawn along by nature's vast stream of life and beauty and is the factor which determines a great mind to turn in the direction of art rather than in that of science.

<sup>1</sup> SHELLEY'S words are as follows: "Poets — the best of them — are a very camelonic (*sic*) race: they take the color, not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass" (To the Gisbornes, July 17, 1821). He has also the following striking remark: "The poet and the man are two different natures; though they exist together, they may be unconscious of each other and incapable of deciding on each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act" (To John and Maria Gisborne, July 19, 1821).

It should hardly be necessary to warn the reader that this emphasis on its sensuous aspects should not be permitted to give rise to the impression that poetic genius does not demand intelligence as well. The essential point is that poetry is the expression of a dual nature, so that neither the power of feeling by itself nor the power of thought by itself can produce it. Intellect alone is not a nature at all, but merely a faculty resident in the total nature of man, so that its operations can neither imitate nature nor even be called natural; while the power of sense perception alone again does not constitute human nature. In the poetic mind both powers are able to work in that subtle balance which, though rarely realised, must be considered the most normal condition of man; and it might be suggested, by way of illustration, that this necessity of harmony between the two, rather than of any unusual strength in one or the other, perhaps explains how there can be minor poets, that is, how the authentic gift of poetry can be present in men with inferior power of abstract thought. Any disturbance of this balance will result in a tendency, either to didactic analysis and explanation, or to obscure emotionalism, both of which are incompatible with art. The true poet in the act of composition, is like his work, so vital a fusion of sense and intellect as to be neither completely of thought nor of feeling; his mind and body become as one, ear, eye, imagination, reason, every faculty of cognitive nature, being absorbed in an act of poised contemplation. The perfect equilibrium of the faculties so reached may explain the trance-like quality of the state, so often described by those who have experienced it; the restless struggle of curious reason and recalcitrant sense is stilled and the entire being of the man now simply "watches and receives":

...that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on, —  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to believe that such an ability to suspend the wilful control of reason and to allow the mind to function as an undivided nature, is not something to be acquired by practice, nor summoned at will, even by the rare spirits who are blessed with it:

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<sup>1</sup> "In which the affections..." — the mind is led into this mood, not by immediate external influence, apparently, but by submission to the affections, to the sensuous side of our being. The eye (not to be taken of course for the mere sense of sight) is "made quiet" in that it no longer seeks or chooses its object; and "the power of harmony" which brings this about will be from within, being the harmony of operation in which mind and body now find themselves. "The deep power of joy" will be that profound well-being, that sense of a paradise regained in the vital nature of man, consequent upon the cessation of the strife among his powers; there being a serenity and contentment in poetic seeing never felt in scientific investigation, however successful.

A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure.

And it will be equally true that so delicate a balance cannot be expected to maintain itself for long. It is an "evanescent visitation," taking flight perhaps at the most trivial distraction; since it is no easy thing for a rational creature to preserve complete detachment in the face of even a slight annoyance. An anxious and ill-balanced prudence, too, is no doubt often the enemy of art in this respect; the moral attitudes built up by so much painful effort tending to leave a man capable of beholding a thing poetically for the moment only. "What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet."

To return at last to the question of the nature and value of the poet's knowledge, it may now be seen how he might in some measure deserve the title of prophet. Certainly the knowledge he has is trustworthy, yet of a mysterious and unaccountable nature, so different indeed from ordinary knowledge that perhaps the term should not be used at all. By submission of his whole being to nature, by learning to work with her unconscious and vital power, he comes to utter judgments and produce works best described as having simply the truth of nature. But this sort of truth is so completely untranslatable into the intelligible terms of science that we find ourselves constantly impelled to describe it as the poet himself would, that is, in metaphor. The inability to explain should not of course lead to a reluctance to accept. Good philosophy will be always ready to agree that there are more things in heaven and earth than it has dreamt of. Indeed it is the realisation of how small is the achievement of philosophy that may help us to see how that of poetry is related to it. The universe, in its complexity and obscurity, will never be completely rationalisable for man; meanwhile he has to live in it, and may well look to poet as well as to philosopher for the direction needed in actual life. The speculative thinker, then, in relation to the poet, should be thought of as somewhat in the same position as the civilized explorer dependent on primitive man for guidance through a jungle. The latter has nothing that can be called science; he does not seek to understand or change the wilderness which is his birthright; he can draw no map, perhaps not even trace a path; yet he will not lose his way, nor go hungry, nor be taken unawares by storm or season. His experience or skill — if we must not call it knowledge — may appear next to nothing when subjected to analysis, yet the advantage it gives him over the stranger of higher culture is very real indeed and the latter is wise in accepting his help. For the present, let us think of poetic knowledge as being after this fashion, although dealing with far loftier objects.

As to the validity of this special sagacity, although its best defence will lie in a simple appeal to experience, a more reasoned basis for it might be found by recalling that the poetic mind has sureness of operation simply because it is a natural force functioning naturally. That power of self-direction which places such a chasm of difference between man and the

other conscious creatures of this earth, is so constantly active that we are inclined to forget the mind in itself is a natural and harmonious whole able to work without our anxious guidance, so to speak. It is true, no doubt, that deliberate and purposeful mental effort, under the direction of wisdom, will accomplish most; but the trouble is that most of us are like poor riders, who make clumsy use of reins and spur and keep our mount in a state of restive bewilderment; the poet is the man who knows enough to give the horse its head and so comes easily and safely home.<sup>1</sup> A mind does not need to know how it has reached truth, after all. Of course, our metaphor is at fault in suggesting that the poet is carried onward by a power not his own, so that he would be scarcely responsible for his own success. With apologies for a vagueness that we are not able to remedy, we should insist that, while there is a strong element of the irresponsible about it, the creative mind is obviously quite conscious of what it is doing and controls itself at least negatively in that it can stop if it pleases. The great point is that this is not the detached consciousness of science; it is not predominantly self-consciousness. To return to a metaphor already employed: the poetic mind is something like the eye, which can be opened or closed as we choose, but once opened, cannot choose but see.

Two further observations may be made to strengthen our confidence in the trustworthiness of the poet's findings. First, it should be remembered that at such inspired moments as we have tried to describe, the mind is functioning at a high degree of intensity; it is rapt and undistracted far beyond the normal. The advantage of such concentration may be appreciated by returning for a moment to our comparison of the poet to primitive man and noting that the latter gathers in so much more with his senses principally because they are not hindered in their activity by the multitude of preoccupations which constantly weaken the attention of civilized persons. The savage, having little else to concern him, is capable of a patient intensity in observation comparable to that of animals, and poets. Here is Shelley describing himself,

He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom.<sup>2</sup>

The poet not only has a superior set of sense-powers, but also the ability of exploiting them to the utmost. In those realms of being where calculation and reasoning are of no avail, in the shifting tangle of human passions and purposes, in the obscure world of sensation, the advantage is all with him. His observation will be more penetrating and above all more com-

<sup>1</sup> It would seem only right to denounce, as MARITAIN does, any attempt to account for poetic inspiration in terms of mere sense. But, without falling into this error, it would appear possible to explain it as we have done, as the harmonious working of the whole mind, avoiding what might deserve to be called an opposite extreme whereby inspiration would become *«la raison surélevée par un instinct d'origine divine»*. Although the writer referred to does not seem disturbed by it, to our mind this *«instinct d'origine divine»* is a threat to the sane Thomistic principle with which he begins, namely, "*Omnium humanorum operum principium primum ratio est.*" Cf. *Art et Scolastique*, p.281.

<sup>2</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.743.



prehensive than any other; no detail will be neglected, so that the resulting expression will rest on a broad foundation and be truly representative. Great dramatic characters are of course the best instances of this, revealing as they do an intelligible complexity that astounds us with the vast experience of human nature it supposes.

In the course of all this talk about the poet as a child of nature whose heritage is a peculiar intuitive truth, the reader may have felt a certain contradiction with which it might be well to deal before terminating the chapter. We have been insisting that the poet is passive to external influence, that he submits himself to reality and so comes to work as nature does; yet it was declared in a previous chapter (and will be again in a later) that the poet is to be distinguished from the scientist precisely because he is not concerned to study reality as it is, but rather to dominate it in his own interest, using nature's forms to suit his ends. The contradiction is, of course, merely apparent, and can offer a real difficulty only if we miss the sense of the passage from St. Thomas. If the mistaken notion be adopted that the artist's task is to make a natural object, it will indeed follow that he may permit himself no liberties with nature. But the truth is that he is led by nature to make an artificial thing, although by a process largely natural. As an incidental condition of his work, nature also supplies him with his materials, but he is clearly obliged to alter their native forms if he is to produce that new reality, beyond the power of nature, which is the work of art.

... Notre art cependant ne peut recomposer son monde propre, sa réalité poétique autonome, qu'en discernant d'abord dans ce qui est les formes qu'il manifeste, et en *ressemblant* ainsi aux choses d'une manière plus profonde et plus mystérieuse qu'aucune évocation directe ne le peut faire<sup>1</sup>.

A final problem is the immediate occasion of the poetic mood; for, even though it be accepted that a rare and delicate consonance of the faculties is sufficient to account for it, there is still reason to ask what cause or stimulus brings about this happy condition. From what has been said above it should be clear that we are not inclined to suppose any but natural agencies at work, and Shelley would seem to support us in this by the remark that "this power arises from within"; and again where he declares that such "conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination." On the other hand, the experience has such an air of mystery, and so submerges the being of the poet in that of the universe, as to positively invite pantheistic interpretation, which may account for language like "it is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own" or "a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one." None of these statements is, of course, an answer to our question; and no hint of anything more specific being offered by our author, we are obliged to leave the matter as it stands. — It is surely unnecessary to apologise for this, or to remark that it is by no means the only, or the most important, problem left un-

<sup>1</sup> J. MARITAIN, *op. cit.*, p.289.

solved. We have already commented on the difficulty and obscurity we have found in this investigation; and the reader should consider the foregoing pages as introductory and tentative.

## V. THE POETIC MEDIUM

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. But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than color, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments, and conditions of art have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters, and musicians, although the intrinsic powers of the great masters of these arts may yield in no degree to that of those who have employed language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts, has never equalled that of poets in the restricted sense of the term; as two performers of equal skill will produce unequal effects from a guitar and a harp. The fame of legislators and founders of religions, so long as their institutions last, alone seems to exceed that of poets in the restricted sense; but it can scarcely be a question, whether, if we deduct the celebrity which their flattery of the gross opinions of the vulgar usually conciliates, together with that which belonged to them in their higher character of poets, any excess will remain.

We have thus circumscribed the word poetry within the limits of that art which is the most familiar and the most perfect expression of the faculty itself. It is necessary, however, to make the circle still narrower, and to determine the distinction between measured and unmeasured language; for the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.

Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a sort of uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence than the words themselves without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principles of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower — and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.

An observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony, which is its spirit, be observed. The practice is indeed convenient and popular, and to be preferred especially in such composition as includes much action; but every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated. Plato was essentially a poet — the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the harmony of the epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forbore

to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. Cicero sought to imitate the cadence of his periods, but with little success. Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends and then bursts the circumference of the reader's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy. All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical, and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. Nor are those supreme poets, who have employed traditional forms of rhythm on account of the form and action of their subjects, less capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things, than those who have omitted that form. Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

In these passages, Shelley, who until now has been taking poetry to mean every work of the imagination, that is, creative thought of any kind, however revealed or expressed, for the first time sets about distinguishing the more restricted sense of the word as the expression of the imagination in a special medium, and then attempts to account for its unquestioned supremacy among the fine arts. Since the occasion is not yet suitable for a critical examination of the first position, according to which almost any noteworthy achievement of the mind would be termed poetry, we shall for the present simply make the poet's purpose our own and consider what he has to say about poetry proper and about that special medium of language in which lie the secrets of its supremacy.

Language has a material and primitive, as well as an intellectual side, and both of these Shelley seems to recognize more or less explicitly as essential to the poet. The former, which he seems to think of almost exclusively in terms of rhythm, is obviously primary and elemental, yet he treats of it only after having emphasised the abstract and intellectual character of speech. In following this order he is quite justified, since his purpose is to show how the medium of poetry causes it to take first place among the arts, and since it is obvious this superiority must result from those properties of the poet's medium which make it the immediate and docile tool of the artistic faculty. The phrase "it is arbitrarily produced by the imagination and has relation to thoughts alone" conveys the true formal nature of language, as a set of signs created and used by imagination, and which, because devised by man to fit the requirements of his own nature, forms a unique and effective instrument for art, being "a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being... susceptible of more various and delicate combinations... and... more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation." Poetry, therefore, stands highest, because its objects, by virtue of their medium of expression, have so much of reason and immanence about them. They cannot be externalised in matter, no matter being conceivable for such productions. The image in this art has a nearness to the mind, a degree of intelligibility, not possible to any other, the nature of words making it possible to suppress or omit the material and unintelligible and retain the intelligible to an unrivalled degree; as will be recognized in a

moment if we compare the revelation of human character seen in a fine portrait or bust with that attainable in the drama. The ancients rightly held poetry to be allied to logic, the objects which both handle and set in order being acts of the mind itself. Like logic, poetry, in virtue of the universality of reason, can dominate all being after a fashion, embracing in a way even the media of the other arts; the poet being able to treat of every sort of subject, and in his treatment to suggest pictorial or sculptural effects, outline, melody, mass and motion. Not that, in some respects, poetry does not betray certain shortcomings when compared with its rivals. The relation between them might perhaps be likened to that between the *sensus communis* and the external senses. While essentially superior to sculpture, painting, or music, poetry does stand at a disadvantage through being more abstract; its conceptions cannot be embodied as are the conceptions of these, and therefore fall short in that immediate intuitiveness characteristic of external sensation. Poetry retains so much of the stuff of thought that it cannot espouse so intimately the forms of sensible things. Yet even this defect is not absolute, since it is at the same time the means whereby the poet's work can reach more deeply into the mind, driving it from within, as it were.

But the superior abstractness and universality enjoyed by poetry is, of course, shared in an equal degree by prose, the unique position of the former consisting, not in the fact that it participates so intimately in the intellectual, but does so without sacrifice of the sensuous, and indeed while enjoying resources of sensuous power even greater than those of the other arts. Here again the poet is privileged, not only because language permits him to suggest the special effects of his rivals, but because, language being sound and movement, his native and essential instrument for speaking to our senses will be rhythm, and rhythm is the most potent of all means to this end. Through rhythm poetry can stir our blood with the power and directness exerted by only one other art, that of music, yet without suffering from that lack of explicit significance which renders the influence of music so vague and impermanent.

The rhythm of language, however, is rooted in that primitive side of it which Shelley makes no attempt to expose, and it is as a thing profoundly natural that rhythm has the great importance in poetry which he claims for it. In order, then, to appreciate how true and deep are his remarks on the relation of sound to meaning and on the basic difference between poetry and prose, it will be necessary to give some attention to the problem of what language is besides being a system of conventional signs, and to that of the nature of rhythm itself.

The material or elemental side of language, whereby is meant that part of it which is given and for which intellect is not responsible, is first of all mere sound, waves in air, devoid of any significance. If the poet had merely to impose order upon these vibrations his task would be comparable to the musician's and much simpler than it is in fact. The difficulty is that the sound the poet manipulates is not on a par with musical notes, whatever



writers like Mallarmé may have thought; it is the utterance of a living, sentient being, issued under the impulse of imagination and appetite, the stuff of groans, sobbing and laughter. In short it is not mere noise, but already bears powerful significance, although that significance is not the result of rational choice. The vast difference between voice and mere sound is manifest even in the cries of lower animals: although varying in quality all the way from the grotesque and harsh to the beautiful, these growls, croakings, gruntings, or songs, all have this in common that they are sound already subject to what might be called purposeful diversification. This quality of significant order, whereby we recognize the cause of the sound to be alive, can reveal itself in attributes too subtle for analysis, such as mere timbre, insistence, inflexion, or alterations of volume, but that which concerns the poet most of all is the special property of rhythm — probably because of its markedly dual appeal to both intellect and sense, and because of its greater susceptibility to artistic direction.

The notion of rhythm in itself is, of course, not an easy one, nor are the various rhythms traceable in vocal sound the simplest exemplifications of it. In all rhythm the basic principle seems to be that a unity can achieve variety, yet retain something of its original unity, if its division or disintegration be according to a certain order. Movement, if it be pure movement, inevitably represents imperfection and loss; it is like liquid escaping from a vessel or a body falling from a height. But should the running or falling take on a certain order; should there become detectable in it something constant and occurring with a certain regularity, then, at each beat or pause there will be, as it were, a return to the primary unity; the breakdown will no longer appear pure destruction, for in the very flight of change something is constructed or accomplished. Many biological processes, it is plain, are vivid examples of this principle. No living body merely endures; the rise and fall of breath, the beating of the heart, are, as it were, a revolt against the universal decree of change, and in these pulsations there is not merely the appearance of a return to the one; an actual process is going on, a climax and a completion being achieved each time. Our human nature is to be an orderly heterogeneity of faculties and organs designed to carry on the movement of life, to proceed and spread out in time, and it is clear that when the heart beats, the hand moves, the eye sees, each must utter in motion and time an order of its own as well as contribute to the order of the whole. Multiple and complex rhythms, therefore, must accompany the movements of at least the higher forms of life, nor could we conceive of a living body as proceeding without rhythm; the movements of the various parts, whether of each organ or of the whole, could not possibly contribute to the general end unless they fell into a certain order of time as well as of form.<sup>1</sup> Here is the ultimate basis of the peculiar power of the arts which are concerned with progression and move-

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<sup>1</sup> Recent medical research has shown, for example, that two or three subordinate rhythms are distinguishable in the beating of the heart, and that these in turn are affected by the rapidity of the breath and by emotional experience.

ment. Our life is a flux and it has been well said of music, for example, that it is less the music that moves us than we who move with it.<sup>1</sup>

As to voice, we may well expect that, as the expression of life, its rhythm will reflect many of the basic movements of the body, as well as the fluctuations of sense-appetite and passion, and perhaps even certain rhythms of external nature which, through power of knowledge, make their contagion felt. And we are obliged to deepen the complexity of the picture by noting that human speech, unlike the utterance of the brute, is influenced, not only by that nature common to all members of the species, but also by a second nature conferred by circumstances of race and environment, so that its rhythms are affected and determined by all the peculiarities of stress, intonation, quality of vowel and consonant which characterise a given tongue, and finally by the presiding guidance of intellect as reflected in grammar and idiom. Hence the baffling complexity of the rhythms perceptible in even the simplest lyric. The poem is a living whole like its creator, the central movement and life of its being catching up all the subordinate rhythms of the various strata of life represented in it.

There should be no need to emphasize that language forms a raw material of a potent and extraordinary kind, having vitality and significance long before the artist's hand has touched it, or before intellect has decided what message it must bear. It is a sort of inarticulate music needing only a conductor, rather than a composer; or, in Shelley's own words, it is "in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem." These comparisons also make it clear that the poet must control forces which are exceedingly elusive and difficult, since the elements of speech to which attention has been drawn above are irrational and in a sense useless or even hostile. We must never forget that the essence of language is to be a sign which is not natural, but the effect of deliberate choice. The lower and natural side of language may therefore become useless or obstructive because, whereas the remote matter of speech, mere sound, constitutes a most plastic material and one well adapted to the subtle activity of the tongue, that intimate tool of reason, the proximate matter of speech is sound already determined by a nature complex and refined so as to have acquired properties mentioned above as reflective of the nature of man in general or of some race of man, and these may readily act as distractions or hindrances to a desired communication. The poet, then, is far from enjoying a pure vehicle of expression such as we find in a set of mathematical symbols; the primitive rhythms of speech, like a smell or a touch, may lay hold on sense and passion long before there is question of explicit meaning.

"Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent..." The distinction between poetry and prose which Shelley is now approaching rests ultimately on this fact, that the sound rhythms of language may be independent of the movement of the thought. Reason will be primarily concerned with the march

<sup>1</sup> G. SANTAYANA, *The Life of Reason, Reason in Art*, London 1905, p.47.

of ideas, to which that of the sounds representative of them will seem at most incidental; so that ideal speech, according to the standards of reason, will be approached when the independent sound and movement in language have dwindled away or become quite unobtrusive, and pure thought is uttering itself in a transparent medium. But the pursuit of such an algebraic form of discourse would, of course, ignore the actual nature of man as composed of both intellect and sense. He is no pure intelligence capable of emitting or receiving concepts directly; he is an intelligence housed within a mortal form, not to be roused or reached except by a commotion at his doors. By nature his mind is passive, and a message is effective with him in proportion as it startles and fixes his attention by a vivid excitation of the only perceptive powers which can bring him knowledge from without. Consequently those properties of language which, being founded deep in nature, have most power to act upon sense and passion, are indispensable to natural man. By the prose-writer the animal undercurrents in phrase and sentence will be mistrusted and avoided as far as possible, because of their treacherous "relations between each other" in which rational choice has no share; but for the masters of a speech more truly human, for the singers who hold the ears of men rapt and spell-bound, "the perception of the order of these relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts." In other words, — to make a bold interpretation of an uncertain passage — for poets there is no division or conflict between the rational and non-rational in language any more than between the corresponding powers in the human nature of which it is the expression. Prose and poetry take different roads here because of the difference in their respective aims. The one seeks to convey a concept, appealing to sense only because it must and to the degree that it must. The end of the other is the expression of an image, the intelligible become sensuous, the sensuous rendered intelligible. The image must be whole, perfect, intimately proportioned to the nature of man; so that it would be not enough to say that the poet uses the sensuous properties of words to support and enhance his meaning; the music of good poetry is not an ornament or device, it is simply an aspect of the meaning. Perhaps we may make our own meaning clearer by noting that poetry should not be considered to stand at an opposite extreme from prose in its attitude towards language; rather is it a mean between the latter and a kind of sub-human expression which would act on man as do the cries of lower creatures upon their fellows. This lower level is approached in verse, haunting and irresistible in sound, while deficient in intelligibility, of which the best example I can think of at the moment is the *El Desdichado* of Gérard de Nerval; the higher is represented by all that neo-classic writing which is mere versified thinking. Into true poetry rhythm and music are bound to enter, but in such a way as to be at once spontaneous and cultivated, natural and artificial, actually sharing in the expression, and appearing neither incidental nor valued for their own sake. "Hence the language of poets has ever affected" — not merely a recurrence of sound such as that which nature displays, but "a sort of uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound." Nor does Shelley hesitate to add that without such

harmony there will be no poetry, the rhythm being as necessary for the communication of what he is careful to call poetry's *influence*, as the words themselves considered apart from the order of their sound.

We can now appreciate "the vanity of translation." It is not merely that a part of the original will be lost in the process. The very nature of the poem will be destroyed, the skeletal element which can be transferred from one language to another being impossible of resuscitation in the alien tongue. For poetry, unlike prose, is not the communication of a meaning, but of a meaning that moves, or sometimes of an influence too indefinable for prose statement and to which the mind could not attend were it not attracted and held by a chime of sound. It may be objected that certain of the rhythms concerned in poetry, since they are based on mere physical nature, should be identifiable in all tongues and should not resist translation; and that the same universality should be true of any metrical order which is the work of intelligence, such as that exemplified in fixed patterns like the sonnet. But to speak thus is again to imply the possibility of a dissection of the poetic image, which is created for hearers whose nature is conditioned to an intense degree by circumstances not shared by all men, and which furthermore must reflect the individual nature of its creator. To speak only of the first of these two aspects of a poem, let it be recalled that the task of the artist is to provide an object of contemplation eminently proportioned to the human mind; the closer and more intimate that proportion, the greater his success. He must appeal then not merely to a general human mind, which in fact has existence nowhere, but to a national or racial mind. To achieve this he will exploit subtleties of accent and intonation not even perceptible to an outsider. There is no need to go so far as translation to see how disastrous will be any attempt to "transfuse" such productions into another medium: we have only to imagine some fine line of English verse read with a French accent, let us say, and a French conduct of voice, to realize how much of its effectiveness would disappear. Again, no French ear will ever fully catch the force of English accentual verse, nor even if we suppose in its possessor a good knowledge of English, could we expect these violent rhythms to give that thrill of satisfaction which they bring to the reader for whom every thought and feeling since childhood has been carried on such pulsations.

The more exact understanding of metre now within our reach will in turn make clearer where lies the precise difference between poetry and prose. An observation of the rhythms employed by poets through the ages led to the classification and standardisation of certain forms. Probably music may have helped in this task, as Shelley suggests, by facilitating the counting and naming of them. Such fixed and identifiable designs with their rules of construction constitute metre, the value and function of which is described by Shelley in terms which may at first seem a bit contradictory. Metre has arisen naturally, be it noted, and constitutes no academic imposition of precepts on the artist; its rigid designs are allowed to be of genuine help, particularly in works dealing with much action; yet they are not necessary to the poet and, more surprising still, a great poet will inevit-



ably innovate upon his models. This paradoxical condition, that fixed rhythmical forms should be a natural and useful part of the artist's equipment, and yet that great poets should find it neither necessary nor even possible fully to submit to them, can be explained on the basis of the principles already set forth. That rhythmical patterns should come into being and have a more or less wide appeal is to be expected in view of the partly artificial, partly natural, origin of poetic rhythm. To the degree that it is an artifice, any rhythm invented by a poet will tend to be as stereotyped and communicable as a formula; the rondel, triolet, ballade and similar designs, for example, being accessible to different artists of different races. To the degree that it is natural, rhythm will again tend to be generated, although to a lesser extent and more obscurely and irregularly, according to certain laws and limits. To understand this second point we must remember that, even intellectually, man is a decidedly limited being. Even in communications of an abstract kind, his feeble powers of comprehension require that there be pauses and repetitions, which become the sentences and paragraphs of prose. On the physical side, the conduct of speech will be governed to an even greater degree by the rhythmical restrictions imposed by such factors as the mere capacity of breath, by the heart-beats, by fatigue or satiety, and in short by all the determined modes and processes of sense life which make it inevitable that our vocal sounds should come forth, not in an unbroken current, nor in disparate fragments, but having shape and fixity something like that found in the cries of the different species of animals. Because of the high complexity of the physical powers of man and their participation in the life of reason, the forms of his speech will obviously be much more numerous, elaborate and flexible than those of lower animals, and his greater adaptability will also bring it to pass, as has been already noted, that their basis will lie more often and more determinately in a second nature acquired through circumstances of birth and upbringing. We may expect to find, then, that poetry in all languages and races will tend to fall into certain forms and make use of certain devices the effectiveness of which would be in some measure felt by men of every race, and at the same time that there will be modifications of these forms and new forms created to suit the ear of certain peoples.

Shelley's remark on the value of such designs, namely, that they are particularly helpful in poems dealing with much action, is worth following up because it reminds us once more of the indissolubly dual nature of art. The more violent and undisciplined the theme, the more proper for a rigid and intricate vehicle of expression; the reason being that poetic rhythm, although reflective of physical and natural life, is never purely spontaneous in growth; it is always in part the work of intellect and represents the normal desire of the thinking being to rationalise and set in order the impulses of passion and desire. Coleridge seems to be quite right in tracing the origin of metre "to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion," as long as he be not interpreted to mean that the intellect is free to cast passion into any arbitrary design and is not rather engaged in refining and organizing rhythms

already obscurely present in nature. The objective of the artist is an intelligible image; but the more violent the passion, the more elusive and unsatisfactory it will be as an object of contemplation, so that, if poetry is to be made of it, if it is to be expressed in such a way as to be understood as well as felt, it must be, not weakened or subdued exactly, but given perspective and intelligibility by means of a rigid design. It is hardly conceivable that such designs should exist, or need to exist, in indefinite numbers, and it is therefore natural that the artist should avail himself of those already in use.

That the great poet is nevertheless driven to adapt and alter the metres of his predecessors is explained by the uniqueness of his experience, a matter already briefly mentioned in connection with the originality of metaphor, but which deserves fuller consideration. The fact to bear in mind here is that human passion is distinguished from that of the brute by its quasi-infinity. In the lower creature, emotions and desires are subject to instinct, that is, they are determined in their objects and modes of operation; but, in man, passion is caught up to a higher plane, so to speak, and participates in the unlimited potency of reason. Its objects are not given and fixed; its limits are not set; and it can readily come to deserve the terrifying metaphors often used by the great poets to describe its extreme manifestations, as, for example, that of the dark tempest forever buffeting the lost souls of Paolo and Francesca. The mere number and nature of the passions may be the same in every case, but their exercise and development being constantly subject to the direction of reason responding to the changing circumstances of daily life, each individual will come to develop a set of attitudes, tastes and feelings of his own. No matter how much he may have been regimented by education or environment, a man's emotions can never be entirely stereotyped, since they are always in some measure his own handiwork. Now, the greater the mind, the keener and more delicate its sensibility, the more likely it is to reject uniformity, to seek out its own experience and, as a result, to become the possessor of an emotional nature distinctive and rich beyond the ordinary. The task of every poet being to express something which, while not merely of sense, is inseparable from sense, it follows that, whereas the conception of a lesser genius may approximate sufficiently to those of others to be communicable in an accepted frame of sound, that of the great poet will be so utterly singular and new as not to be communicable through a design created for other purposes.

He's all at odds with all the unities  
 And what's yet worse, it doesn't seem to matter;  
 He treads along through Time's old wilderness  
 As if the tramp of all the Centuries  
 Had left no roads — and there are none, for him;<sup>1</sup>

The great artist must inevitably innovate, altering the old form to suit his needs, or finding for his new thought a completely new music.

<sup>1</sup> E. A. ROBINSON, *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Statford*, (from *The Man Against the Sky*. Copyright, 1916, by the Macmillan Company and used with their permission).

Yet no poet, whatever the degree of his talent, is under the necessity of using any fixed metrical form. His lines, if they be true poetry, will always move to a music which, whether obtrusive or subtle, fixed or flexible, will be decisive in its influence and inseparable from the meaning; but no identifiable pattern or measure need be present. The popular mind — although this was truer in Shelley's day than in our own — has grown so familiar with accepted forms that it assumes every poet must employ them and that everyone who employs them is a poet. But the real basis of the distinction between poetry and prose does not lie in the use or avoidance of metre; it lies ultimately in the difference between the objects of each. Poetry, not content with the apprehension of reality in "algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results," seeks to convey an "integral unity" by making an image of it in language, that is, by the construction of a new integral unity by which we shall be granted an insight into the nature of the original. The poetic image, one in itself and sensible, speaks to intellect and sense as one; there is no separating its material and formal aspects, its sound and meaning. In prose, on the other hand, there is always a certain conflict between the thought and its means of expression; the form would rid itself entirely of the matter if it could, reaching towards the inaccessible ideal of pure thought conveyed by imperceptible means. The order upon which the prose-writer is intent being that of concepts only, he has no use for those natural rhythms which so easily get the better of reason. The poet, since he has something to communicate which, being in part sensuous, is not directly communicable, will use them to bring about in us a repetition of his experience; and these primitive fluctuations and throbbings, refined by the skill of his art, then acquire an uncanny power of stimulating and sustaining thought. The prose-writer is like a man who prefers a motor-car and a smooth highway in the interests of a safe and profitable journey. The poet has tamed and mounted a splendid steed and rides him magnificently; even on the travelled highway a gallop with him is an exhilarating experience, while he can also carry us into inaccessible regions where prose does not venture.

*(To be continued)*

ANTHONY DURAND.

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