

## Poetry and Language in Shelley's Defence of Poetry

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JOHN ROSS BAKER

## *Poetry and Language in Shelley's Defence of Poetry*

THIS ESSAY might have been called "Making Sense in Shelley's *Defence*," for my aim of "making sense" of Shelley, necessitates, and is in part prompted by, an examination of the conflicting "senses" others have already made of him. The ambiguous title would point to a few of the problems facing a theorist who approaches the *Defence*, along with the commentary grown up around it, expecting this ambitious theoretical statement to be a coherent whole—or "make sense." Some commentators seem to make their own sense that clashes with the possibly obscure sense-making that has already gone on in the text. Though they may do this wishing to defend Shelley, some of my own efforts will also be in defense of Shelley—but *against* these other defenders. Not that all my activities will be defensive: only by seeing where the *Defence* actually breaks down, or by defending the need for more sense or coherence where none is forthcoming, can one hope to assess Shelley's actual achievement.

Having in effect charged Shelley's commentators with willfully misreading him, I must acknowledge that I, too, may be providing only one more misreading. This is especially necessary since, searching for systematic consistency, I shall sometimes have to extrapolate, piecing together strands of argument that do not quite make sense without help. I shall even, when pressed,

search for examples when Shelley writes about what is beyond exemplification.

Misreadings of Shelley, however, may actually be only a part of a pattern according to which commentators appear to find in the rich and diversified contents of the *Defence*, and Romantic criticism generally, whatever sense suits their particular interests. Thus a recent admiring book on Structuralism finds "important connections" between Structuralism and Romantic theories: "much of modern anthropology and linguistics may be said to be contained," for example, in the *Defence*, for Shelley himself "has the spirit of a social scientist."<sup>1</sup> Yet whatever the kinship to modern anthropology and linguistics and hence to Structuralism, the fact remains—detrimental to the presumed coherence of the treatise—that the "spirit of the social scientist" would be the spirit of "calculation" that the *Defence* is directed against. If here Shelley is brought into line with late developments in theory, previously he was brought into line, surprisingly, with Anglo-American New Criticism long after that movement had waned.

Whereas the analogies implicit in the *Defence* among poetry, the other arts, and social institutions may make one see its author as a proto-Structuralist, recent specialists, according to Donald H. Reiman in a review of Shelley criticism, no longer read the "*Defence* as merging poetry with other forms of human creativity."<sup>2</sup> These specialists pointedly avoid the "Platonic" reading of earlier commentators like M. H.

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Abrams, who found a "general annulment of distinction between the characters in a single poem, between individual poems, between poems and the products of other arts, and between the arts and all other pursuits of men."<sup>3</sup> Though obviously the specialists would not try to make Shelley a proto-New Critic, they still move him in the direction of those critics who, trying to avoid "a general annulment of distinction" between poems and everything else, sometimes used "Platonic" to name a species of bad poetry.<sup>4</sup> Reiman himself clearly finds his own sense in defense of Shelley when, reacting against "Platonic" readings, he has Shelley assert a new, and limited, definition of poetry:

Shelley says clearly that the only art that can be called *poetry* consists of imaginative "arrangements of language, and especially metrical language." Even when he calls Plato and Bacon poets, he does so on the basis of the qualities in their language; and, to make this irreplaceable criterion clearer, he states: "All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images . . . ; but *as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical, and contain in themselves the elements of verse . . .*" [ellipses and italics are Reiman's].<sup>5</sup>

Combating "Platonic" readings, Reiman moves Shelley toward those New Critical definitions of poetry that Elder Olson once parodied: "Poetry is words which, or language which, or discourse which."<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, although Shelley does define poetry in the sense Reiman stresses, he provides also for the "general annulment of distinction" between poems and even non-linguistic things that might preclude the more limited definition, for—despite Reiman—he clearly says, as I shall show, that *many* arts (and nonarts) besides that involving "arrangements of language" can be called poetry. Obviously, it would appear, Reiman and the "Platonic" readers, finding divergent definitions, cannot both be right unless both capture only a partial truth. But if both make in Shelley a sense that is only partial, what is the full sense, if any, to be found in the *Defence*? My own attempt to discover the sense made in the

*Defence* will begin, then, with the definition of poetry—a difficult place because at times Shelley allows so few limits to poetry that it may not be proper even to speak of definitions.

## I

A principal difficulty in the *Defence* lies in the extreme broadness of the definition of poetry. This is not an insurmountable difficulty, though the differences between Reiman and the earlier commentators show that *indeed* Shelley's sense is not self-evident. If, as W. K. Wimsatt argues, Coleridge and the Germans felt "a powerful temptation to equate philosophy and poetry,"<sup>7</sup> Shelley gives in to the temptation at once when he says, "Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton are philosophers of the very loftiest power."<sup>8</sup> The surrender leads him to include in "poetry" the writings not only of Plato and Bacon (977, 983) but even of historians and "authors of revolutions in opinion" (978). This "poetry," if broad, is yet only "poetry in a more restricted sense," the sort of composition (or the aggregate of compositions) ordinary theorists often mean by "poetry": "those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by" the imagination (977). There is also, broader still, the "poetry" produced by "poets in the most universal sense of the word" (976): "poetry, in a general sense," "the expression of the imagination" (975). In fact, given this initial "expressive" definition, Shelley can assert that "poets . . . are . . . the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture, and statuary, and painting; . . . the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers . . . [of] religion" (976). He can find the "true poetry of Rome . . . in its institutions" (982), poetry in "the Christian and Chivalric systems" (983), and even poetry in certain "systems of thought," though "concealed by . . . facts and calculating processes" (986).

What does poetry *not* include? Toward the end of the *Defence* appears the culmination of what has been implicit all along:

there are hardly any limits to "poetry," for "It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge" (986). Indeed, to speak of *defining* poetry—as I have done, and as Shelley himself does (975)—may be misleading, for there is little in the *Defence* from which to differentiate it. True, as "the expression of the imagination," it is from the beginning contrasted with the products of the "reason," the "principle of analysis" (975) or the "calculating faculty" (985); but even this antithesis dissolves as imagination and poetry "turn[ing] all things to loveliness" (987), extend their domain. Thus the benefits for "deluded humanity" produced by "mere reasoners" like Locke and Gibbon come from "the intervention of [the] excitements" resulting from the poetry in their work (986). Without the enabling power of poetry, "the invention of the grosser sciences" and the "application [in economics] of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society" would be ineffectual. But poetry does more than enable: poetry is actually, as I have indicated, in "these systems of thought." At this point a cynical reader—or a "mere reasoner"—would conclude: Shelley has extended the meaning of "poetry" so as to encompass whatever he pleases, or whatever pleases him; faced with the embarrassment that certain things in "institutions" and "systems of thought" do happen to please him, he finds in them "poetry" in order to remove them from the realm of reason or "calculation."

This sense a cynical reader would make of Shelley's definition is only an intensification of the earlier "Platonic" stress on the "general annulment of distinction" in the *Defence*. When Shelley specialists like Reiman abandon this "Platonic" reading, they are ignoring the plain sense found everywhere; Reiman himself regards the "Platonic" reading as not only unfashionable but simply wrong. Because the matter bears on Shelley's definition, Reiman's claim—"Shelley says clearly that the only art that can be called *poetry* consists of imaginative 'arrangements of language'"—needs examining. True, as Reiman asserts, Shelley says clearly that he thinks of "the authors

of revolutions in opinion" as poets because their sentences "contain in themselves the elements of verse." But does he really say, clearly or otherwise, "that the only art that can be called *poetry* consists of imaginative 'arrangements of language' "? Does he even say that poetry is necessarily *verbal*? Although he calls Plato, Bacon, and "the authors of revolutions in opinion" poets "on the basis," as Reiman insists, "of the qualities in their language," this does not provide the demonstration that Reiman presents it as. One could of course argue—though Shelley has the sense not to—that the "poetry" in "systems of thought" refers ultimately to "elements of verse" in the writings embodying these systems. One might also argue, even less plausibly, that when Shelley finds "the true poetry of Rome . . . in its institutions," this involves "qualities of language"—perhaps in the texts from which are inferred the "immortal dramas" involving Camillus and the others (982). Such arguments would indeed keep the *Defence* from "merging poetry with other forms of human creativity," but only at the cost of an interpretation that creates in Shelley senses as strange as those it is designed to avoid.

Furthermore, no matter how one interprets poetry in "systems of thought" and "institutions," the plain fact is that Shelley uses "poetry" to refer to many arts besides those involving language—as well as to activities not ordinarily called art by Shelley or others. Because, as I shall eventually argue, the broadness of the definition bears crucially on the apology for poetry Shelley is able to make, it is worth pursuing. Before proceeding, however, I must emphasize that I have been taking "poetry" as what is produced by a "poet," and the "poet" as a person who produces "poetry." Such, in fact, is the usage established early in the *Defence*. The paragraph in question begins: "poets . . . are the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary and painting" (976). Here, since the "authors" of the various arts are "poets," then music, dance, architecture, statuary, and paintings are "poetry." At the end of the paragraph, as he explains that

the "poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one," Shelley asserts that "grammatical forms" designating time, person, and place "are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry." The illustration for this idea about "the highest poetry" he would draw—"if the limits of [his] essay did not forbid citation"—from several different arts. Thus, just as the opening of the paragraph unites various artists as "poets," so the conclusion unites various arts as "poetry." In addition, the structure of the clauses plays up the inclusiveness of "poetry"; the other arts in this case could provide for Shelley's point even better illustrations than "writings" would:

the choruses of Æschylus, and the book of Job, and Dante's Paradise, would afford, more than any other *writings*, examples of this fact. . . . The creations of sculpture, painting, and music are illustrations *still more decisive*. [977; italics added]

Here "sculpture, painting, and music"—no less than "writings"—are "poetry." If they are not, then how can "creations of sculpture, painting and music" provide—for a "fact" about "the highest poetry"—"illustrations still more decisive" than "the choruses of Æschylus"? Though "poetry" often involves "arrangements of language," sometimes it does not involve language at all, and here these other "poetries" become the highest of the high. The commentator who denies that Shelley regards all the arts—and many other activities—as "poetry" makes parts of the *Defence* unnecessarily obscure. Given the "convertibility" of "grammatical forms" in "the highest poetry," the *Defence* is already sufficiently problematic.

But, despite the extreme broadness of the definition thus far, there is nevertheless still more to "poetry." Though "poetry" threatens to consume virtually all human activities (all but those issuing totally from the "calculating faculty"), there is another, quite different, yet almost concurrent meaning—the one that, in his anti-"Platonic" stance, Reiman takes to be operating throughout. There are actually, then, two "poetries": "poetry, in a general sense," as "the expression of the imagination" (975), and "poetry in a more restricted sense," which employs

particular "arrangements of language, and especially metrical language" (976). The second "poetry," also an "expression of the imagination," is a *species* of the first—just as painting and the other arts are yet other species of "poetry, in a general sense." So there are, in fact, many "poetries" as species of the one "poetry, in a general sense." Indeed, because this second "poetry" employs language in a special way, a way appropriate to its species, we have here something like a definition of "poetry" in terms of language, for language—particular "arrangements of language"—differentiates this "poetry" from the other "poetries" and also from (what, to preserve Shelley's distinction, I must call) nonpoetry, in which language is bent only to those utilitarian ends dictated by the "calculating faculty." If Shelley's definition of "poetry in a more restricted sense" bears a family resemblance to those New Critical definitions of poetry in terms of language that Elder Olson objected to, this should not be a surprise: the reservations of Reiman and other specialists about the earlier "Platonic" readings seemed designed to provide a meaning of poetry in agreement with the dominant theory of the time. But to reduce all the meanings to just that of "poetry in a more restricted sense," no matter how up-to-date it may make Shelley appear, is to oversimplify.

## II

Before examining Shelley's view of language in poetry—or "poetry in a more restricted sense"—I must consider further the various meanings of "poetry," for they seem responsible for an occasional potential obscurity, just as they are certainly the source of the differences between Reiman and Abrams. Failing to reckon with the different meanings, each commentator takes one or the other, but not both, to be operating throughout.

The apparent obscurity in the *Defence* comes into view when one asks which "poetry" Shelley is writing about at any given moment. What "poetry," for example, does he write about in the concluding paragraphs? This is, perhaps, to ask about the

"poetry" of the title. Given, near the end, the optimistic assertion about "the literature of England . . . aris[ing] . . . from a new birth" as well as the emphasis in the last paragraphs on *writers*, the famous phrase "unacknowledged legislators" must refer to poets as masters of the special "arrangements of language" characteristic of "poetry in a more restricted sense." But, as such, they are also necessarily poets "in a general sense" because all the species of poetry have the characteristic of "poetry, in a general sense": all are, in their differing media, "expressions of the imagination." Consequently, at different points, although a single sense may prevail, the general sense is always present and ultimately inseparable from the other because no species can lack the defining characteristic of its genus. In short, the defense of "poetry in a restricted sense" entails, for Shelley, a simultaneous defense of all the products of the imagination. If, on the other hand, a composition resembles "poetry" in its "arrangements of language" but is not to Shelley an "expression of the imagination," he withholds from it, or its author, the name of poetry: the "hoarse Codri of the day" are therefore, in an abusive yet systematically justified term, only "versifiers" (988).

Although these multiple yet sometimes simultaneous meanings of "poetry" would not satisfy a sensible Aristotelian demand for different terms for genus and species, Shelley's usage seems generally clear, if hardly to be recommended as a model. Once one grasps the principle, this usage is also helpful with a puzzling yet crucial passage about verbal "poetry": "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" (977). Though the immediate context shows that "poetry" sometimes refers to other arts than verbal "poetry," the puzzling element is the word "convertible," glossed by Abrams as "inter-convertible": in "the highest poetry" there is (in Abrams' terms) a "general annulment of distinction" in which, as Shelley says, "time and place and number are not."<sup>9</sup> Despite the important

statement to follow about "the vanity of translation," Shelley here presents as a "fact" that in "the highest poetry" the "grammatical forms" designating time, person, place are translatable into each other; that, in other words, if in such poetry one substituted "was" for "is," "I" for "thou," or even "this" for "that," there would be no harm done to this "highest poetry" as "poetry." Such, at any rate, is the case if we take, as I see no alternative to doing, "convertible" to mean "inter-convertible" or even "inter-translatable."

But what can this kind of "convertibility" be? How can it fail to injure the highest as well as the lowest poetry? The answer lies in what can infer about "the highest poetry." We can think of this tentatively as a verbal poetry that expresses the imagination more directly than any other "poetry." Because verbal poetry is "the most [nearly] perfect expression of the faculty itself" (977), "the highest poetry" would approach an immediate or even *unmediated* expression of the imagination and its vision, as if the poetry somehow got beyond language. (Because of later qualifications I must separate "most perfect" with a bracketed "nearly" and say *approach* rather than *present* an unmediated expression—as if it were possible to think of "expression" as "unmediated.") This vision would be unqualifiedly monistic: "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" (977); later we learn, "All *high* poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially" (985; italics added). So in "the highest poetry" the Many of language, with the "grammatical forms" that insist on time, place, and number, are consumed by the One of the imagination's vision. In this poetry "grammatical forms," having no "moods of time," no "difference of person," and no "distinction of place" to express—having, in short, *no expressive function at all*—could indeed be "convertible." What "injury" could "converting" possibly do to this "highest poetry" as "poetry" expressive of "the eternal, the infinite, and the one" in which "time and place and number are not"? Though it

might otherwise seem a strange non sequitur, Shelley's statement that sculpture, painting, and music provide "illustrations still more decisive" for this "fact" about verbal poetry can now be seen to make quite intelligible sense—at least in terms of Shelley's theory. The "poetries" of these other arts, precisely *because* they lack the grammatical forms tying language and its poets to time, place, and number, are for Shelley "illustrations still more decisive."

Yet despite the implied superiority of the media of these other "poetries," making them fitter vehicles for "the highest poetry," only a few paragraphs later Shelley argues for the superiority of language itself over the media of the other "poetries": these media "interpose between conception and expression" (977) more than language. At one point, language is inferior; at another point, it is superior. The inconsistency here, the self-contradiction, springs from a profound ambivalence about "poetry" in its various senses. But, in order to uncover this ambivalence, we must continue further with the concept of "convertibility" and its relation to Shelley's ideas about the media of the various "poetries."

Now, although Shelley protests that his "limits . . . forbid citation," the fact is that no exemplification of "convertibility" seems possible. And Shelley, too, must at some level know this. In what poetry, highest or lowest, could the "grammatical forms" be "convertible"? Of course, one might adduce seemingly exemplary passages from Shelley's own "Epipsychidion" or Donne's "The Extasie" or, anachronistically, Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*:

TRISTAN: Tristan du,  
ich Isolde,  
nicht mehr Tristan!

ISOLDE: Du Isolde,  
Tristan ich,  
nicht mehr Isolde!

BEIDE: Ohne Nennen,  
ohne Trennen,  
neu' Erkennen,  
neu' Entbrennen;  
ewig endlos,

ein-bewusst:  
heiss erglühter Brust  
höchste Liebeslust!

But in each case we would find that attempts at "converting" cause considerable injury: they would prevent the unions, the mergings of two into one, that these poems present and appear to celebrate. Simpler than the others, the *Tristan* lines are a *tour de force* in this mode, as if the poet were looking back to Shelley as well as ahead to Nietzsche: they obliterate time by dispensing with finite verbs—and even normal sentences, which with Shelley we may call "periods." The lines indeed insist on "converting" "ich" to "du," yet if we reconverted the already converted pronouns we would destroy "ein-bewusst": once the "conversion" has occurred, the "grammatical forms" are no longer "convertible." The poet, exploiting the grammatical resources of his medium, must also accept the limitations of the medium if he is to present lovers who themselves want to get beyond language ("Ohne Nennen") and life itself. They would merge with Shelley's "the eternal, the infinite, and the one." Even so, in this "poem" the exploitation of the musical medium that lacks the "grammatical forms" tying language to person, time, and place ensures that what *is* done with language will be at best, in actual productions, only minimally intelligible.

As I have suggested, the *Defence* contains two conflicting, even contradictory views of the medium of poetry. Much of the time language is for Shelley hardly a medium at all: unlike the media of the other arts, which are physical, language is not only the expression but also the creation of the imagination. As such, it would be a "direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being," and it would be "plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation." The superiority of language to the media of the other arts is unmistakable: it "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" (977).<sup>10</sup> Even sound, the medium of music, is more obviously physical, more obviously an Aristotelian material cause. In the spirit of this view of the verbal medium—or should one say nonmedium?—Shelley speaks of "convertibility" in "the highest poetry," and, following him, I have spoken of an "*unmediated expression*."

Yet, though the primary emphasis is on language as an utterly transparent medium not "interpos[ing] between conception and expression," or as "a mirror which" (in a revision of the old metaphor for mimesis)<sup>11</sup> "reflects the light" of the imagination, a secondary, and slighter, emphasis nevertheless subverts the first. Indeed, Shelley argues for the transparency of the medium in a way that leaves room, but only a little room, for a view that runs counter to the first. In contrasting language with the media of the other arts, he usually makes the difference between them one of *degree* only, not *kind*. Despite the unmistakable thrust toward transparency, he says that language is a "*more direct representation . . . 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*" the imagination. Even asserting the "interposition" of other media "between conception and expression," he allows for a little, but again only a little, "interposition" by language. Likewise, "*more direct*" and "*more plastic and obedient*" do not necessarily mean—in fact, cannot mean—"totally direct" and "*totally plastic and obedient*." The distinction between differences of degree and of kind is here so small that I must apologize for the tortuousness to which I am driven in expounding it. Perhaps Shelley's apparent lapse in referring to poetry as "the *most perfect expression of*" the imagination (977) epitomizes his conflicting views of the medium. A *perfect* expression would require an utterly transparent medium, an utterly undistorting mirror; it would not admit of degrees. Yet once "perfect" is qualified with the degree-term "most," the expression becomes *less* than perfect, for it can be only "*nearly perfect*," even if "*most*

nearly perfect." "Most perfect" falls short of perfection.

Or perhaps Shelley's ambivalent attitude toward the medium can be clarified if one notes how it approaches the extreme position of a contemporary Continental theorist. Hegel arranges the various arts in an ascending hierarchy as their media become progressively free of the physical; interestingly, "poetry" is for Hegel "a common thread" through all the arts:

The true medium of poetical representation is the poetical imagination and the intellectual presentation itself; and inasmuch as this element is common to all types of art it follows that poetry is a common thread through them all, and is developed independently in each. Poetry is, in short, the universal art of the mind, which has become essentially free, and which is not fettered in its realization to an externally sensuous material. . . . [In poetry] the external medium is wholly suppressed into insignificance.<sup>12</sup>

A. C. Bradley's objection to Shelley's view of the medium could apply with even more force to Hegel's:

what [the artist] expresses is inseparable from the vehicle of expression; and . . . he has no conceptions which are not from the beginning sculpturesque, pictorial, or musical. It is true, no doubt, that his medium is an obstacle as well as a medium; but this is also true of language.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the *Defence* nevertheless contains a minimal acknowledgment—or at least the potential for an acknowledgment—of the idea summed up so well by Bradley: the "medium is an obstacle as well as a medium."<sup>14</sup> This potential is enough to allow Shelley to proceed to a discussion of the language of poetry sharply different from that we have been examining, and quite different from Hegel's.

When he treats "the distinction between measured and unmeasured language" (977), he seems to acknowledge that what is "expressed" in a poem is not precisely a reflection of the imagination but instead something that arises, at least in part, from the poet's special manipulations of a language not as transparent as elsewhere he takes it to be. "Sounds as well as thoughts," he says, "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 those relations of thoughts." Although one must agree with Shelley (and Hegel) that language is not physical, here is a recognition that poetic language with its special sounds—the metrical and rhyming patterns as well as the other conventions or "arrangements of language" that poets use or devise anew—has more than the simple *reflective* or *expressive* capacity earlier assigned to it: sounds, in effect, "interpose between conception and expression" when the poet, as he must, seeks "a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound."

The metaphor of "harmony," used so often in the *Defence*, recalls the remarkable Aeolian lyre passage:

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 Æolian 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 the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. [975]

Here the imagination works in creating our world, which is not merely alien and external, nor merely projected. It is neither the "melody" of what impinges on us nor the "melody" we project in response, but a "harmony" of both "melodies." Given "harmony" as the common element in language and in the perception that makes our world, we can extrapolate from the process that makes the world to the process that makes the poem. Such extrapolation, bringing together seemingly disparate strands of the *Defence*, is necessary for a grasp of Shelley's position on the medium of poetry. Most of the time he would have poetry, lyre-fashion, a reflection or expression of the imagination: but when he introduces the "harmony" of sound he makes language itself, like "the principle within the human being" in the act of perception, enter into the process of composition. The imagination, "the principle within," helps shape the world in perception,

making our eyes more than mirrors reflecting (or windows opening on) the world; language, as manipulated in poetry, is like the imagination in making the poem more than an expression or reflection of "thought." Indeed, the process of composition can now be called *creative* in other than an honorific sense, for the poem is more than (or at least different from) a reflection or expression of the imagination, to which it is no longer wholly answerable. The radical novelty arising from the creative interaction of language and imagination depends not on the poet's prior vision but on the vision that emerges as he manipulates his medium in his search for "a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound" and certain "arrangements of language."

Because my extrapolations may not clarify how the composition of a poem, produced with the poet's special "arrangements of language," would differ from the composition of ordinary prose, the nonpoem as it were, I will try to explain. If the process of composition were analyzed further to include nonpoems, it would be found that they are made through the ordinary writer's concern with all that Shelley seems to include under "grammatical forms": the poet's "arrangements" do not enter into the process at all, unless only for "calculating," pseudo-poetic purposes. So, in prose as well as poetry, language operates analogously to imagination in perception: the "grammatical forms" in prose helping to shape the thought, and the "arrangements" doing the same in poetry. It must be added that, despite Shelley's idea of "convertibility" in "the highest poetry," the "grammatical forms" designating person, time, and place would enter into the composition of poetry as well as of prose, even though a further qualification is necessary: because of the poet's "arrangements of language" the "grammatical forms" may not perform precisely the same function as in prose, but the modifications in expressive function that these forms undergo would fall far short of the "convertibility" of Shelley's "highest poetry." Thus, with the poet's "arrange-

ments" excluded from prose, poetry would differ in *kind*, not *degree*, from prose. This, I believe, is consistent with Shelley's remarks about the poet's concern with "sounds" and his argument about "the authors of revolutions in opinion."

But the analogy between imagination in perception and language in composition, which licenses my extrapolations, causes difficulties, not the least of which is that for Shelley imagination operates in both perception and composition. More important, even though poetry would differ in kind from prose, the poet's imagination differs—for Shelley, as for Coleridge—from our everyday imagination only in degree, not kind: what theorist could argue that poets are a different species of people? Consequently, when Coleridge explains the secondary Imagination, an "echo" of the primary but operative in the creation of poetry, he italicizes the words I need to stress, too: it is "identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation."<sup>15</sup> Shelley, though less explicit, is equally clear: "Those in whom [imagination] exists *in excess* are poets, in the most universal sense of the word" (976; italics added). Furthermore, with a theory beginning in speculations about the imagination rather than language, "poetry" must appear in all sorts of activities, as we have observed in the *Defence*, and as we can find in Coleridge: there is "poetry of the highest kind" in Plato, Taylor, and Burnet, or "All the fine arts are different species of poetry."<sup>16</sup> For Shelley, as for Coleridge, it would seem, "What is Poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution to the other."<sup>17</sup> Poetry, under these circumstances, has little chance of being distinguished in theory from prose unless, as in the *Defence*, the medium is separated from the imagination and given a role in composition. But, even so, the difference in *kind* argued for on the basis of a theory of composition, especially a frankly extrapolated theory, provides a way of distinguishing poetry from nonpoetry in only an inchoate

fashion. But, again, this may still be in keeping with the *Defence*: too nice a distinction between poetry and its opposite would move the *Defence* toward "reason," which "respects the differences," and away from imagination, which respects "the similitudes of things."

Here, nevertheless, if my extrapolations are firmly grounded, Shelley has earned the theoretical right to his eloquent words on "the vanity of translation":

it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, 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. [977]

Ironically, despite Bradley's objections, Shelley's position here is actually that asserted by Bradley: "What [the artist] expresses is inseparable from the vehicle of expression." Furthermore, he might say, on the basis of the arguments that support "the vanity of translation" passage, what Bradley elsewhere says: "Hence in true poetry"—that poetry coming about through the creative interaction of imagination and medium—"it is, in strictness, impossible to express the meaning in any but its own words, or to change the words without changing the meaning." He might also say, again on the basis of the creative role of language, and again with Bradley, "If the poet already knew exactly what he meant to say, why should he write the poem? The poem would in fact already be written. For only its completion can reveal, even to him, exactly what he wanted."<sup>18</sup> The meaning of the poem is not to be found anywhere but *in these words, in this order*—in the words of the poem—not even in the images that would result if a magic lantern could throw the imagination's nerves in patterns on a screen.

As I have noted, the anti-"Platonic" Reiman, finding "poetry" used in only a limited sense, moves Shelley into line with New Critical definitions of "poetry." In fact, in what I have extrapolated about the process of composition, Shelley is unexpectedly close

to the New Critics. Even if he is the Romantic poet farthest from the New Critics—Cleanth Brooks, a specialist once said, “advances upon Shelley equipped only with his standards and his bare fists”<sup>19</sup>—a parallel between him and the New Critics should not come as a surprise, after all; for central in his major theoretical document, more than in the other Romantics, is an aim that can serve as a link to the New Critics. Like him, many of them have been distinguished defenders of poetry. The Neo-Aristotelian R. S. Crane found their efforts motivated by a “morbid obsession . . . with the problem of justifying and preserving poetry in an age of science. This,” he said, “has resulted in an extraordinary florescence of modern apologies for poesy.”<sup>20</sup> And, in a nearly exhaustive exploration of New Critical theory, Murray Krieger, taking off from precisely the “need” felt by these critics “to justify poetry by securing for it a unique function for which modern scientism cannot find a surrogate,” identifies them as “new apologists for poetry.” Essential to the New Critics’ apology, Krieger shows, is a theory of poetic creation in which language can play a formative role.<sup>21</sup> It is such a theory that, in portions of the *Defence*, Shelley provides. By allowing language a role in the creation of the poem instead of making it the passive reflector of a prior imaginative vision, he even provides support for the critical and philosophical attitudes W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argue for in “The Intentional Fallacy.” But this fallacy, the authors point out in the second section of their essay, is a Romantic one—a reminder to me that my extrapolations are from only a *part* of Shelley’s account of the language of poetry.

Though these extrapolations have been designed to bring into relief an important aspect of the *Defence*, Shelley is obviously far from consistent on the medium of poetry. After his eloquence on “the vanity of translation,” he laments “the burthen of the curse of Babel” rather than celebrates the “curse” as an opportunity in disguise, and he has already committed himself on “convertibility.” This doctrine, destroying

even the grammar of a language, makes the medium totally subservient to the poet’s vision. It is as inconsistent with his ideas about “sounds” as it is with the first-hand knowledge that probably led him to sense the recalcitrance of his medium in the first place. Language does, for Shelley, “interpose between conception and expression,” but only in the minimal ways I have shown. Elsewhere, when he seems to recognize the recalcitrance of the medium, it is only to exalt the imagination at the expense of the poem. Here, for example, language would seem to “interpose between conception and expression” as much as any physical medium:

. . . 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 colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the Poet. [987]

Because “the mind” has been “in creation” *before* “composition begins,” composition itself can be at best only “communication,” not “creation.” Earlier the media of the other arts were “a cloud which enfeebles” and language was “a mirror which reflects the light of” the imagination (977), but here language no longer “reflects” any light, not even that of the “fading shadow.” “Composition,” earlier depending on an at least minimally resistant medium coming to interact with the imagination to produce the poem, has now become a hopeless struggle, and language itself “a cloud which enfeebles.” As the defense of the poem, “the feeble shadow” in contrast with the “light” of the imagination, is thus weakened, so is the defense of all those other products of the imagination that Shelley calls “poetry.” In fact, given the extent to which the various media “interpose between concep-

tion and expression," even the defense of the imagination begins to break down; for the imagination—the "light," the "fading coal"—becomes inaccessible. Though he begins by defining poetry as "the expression of the imagination," in the end that "expression" cannot take place. So, despite the ringingly affirmative final paragraphs, the claims therein are undercut by the waverings and doubts elsewhere.

Shelley is powerless to overcome the doubts, partly because he rigorously excludes the *will* from the creation (or "composition") of poetry. Unlike Coleridge, who stipulates that the secondary Imagination "co-exist[s] with the conscious will," Shelley makes creation all but unconscious: "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the external determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry'" (986). Now, with the operation of the will obviously involved in the account of poetic creation extrapolated from the discussion of the medium, I felt free to say that the poet "manipulates his medium in his search for 'a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound.'" But Shelley himself, even when he speaks of "the vanity of translation" and the "harmonious recurrence," carefully excludes the will. Rather than have the poet seek the "harmonious recurrence," he lets language do the work on its own with the poet as, at most, a passive overseer: "Hence the language of poets"—not the poets themselves—"has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound." Even the argument about "the vanity of translation," which more than anything else in the *Defence* would seem to acknowledge the poet's manipulation of his language, finally appeals to an organicist analogy that again excludes the will: "The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flowers." In his ambivalence he has the medium at times "plastic and obedient" in the ways we have seen, but he also has it, at other times, taking over in the creative process. In either case, the poet as a conscious, willing artist has no place: when "plastic and

obedient," the medium obeys the imagination; when otherwise, it would seem to go its own way, like a plant. The poet, like Shelley in his doubts, is also powerless; and, as we have seen, even "the most glorious poetry" is only "a feeble shadow" of the imagination.

### III

"Doubts about the creative power of the poet," says a recent student of Shelley's "myth of metaphor," "are evident everywhere except in the *Defence*."<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, I urge, one of the fascinations of the *Defence*—and the source of the difficulties I have been exploring as well as a justification for seeing Shelley at times, despite Reiman, as a kind of "Platonist"—is the actual presence of the doubts that keep the treatise from cohering as a systematic whole. It is possible, I believe, to sum up the major conflict at the heart of the *Defence* without excessive simplification. On one hand is the broad or "Platonic" definition of "poetry" as encompassing all the creations of the imagination in the various arts and other activities; along with this, indeed dictated by the centrality of the imagination in the definition, is the view of artistic media as ideally all but transparent in their obedience to the imagination. With this "poetry" the medium sometimes disappears: when there is "poetry" in Roman "institutions" or in "the Christian and Chivalric systems," what can the medium be? On the other hand is the definition of "poetry in a more restricted sense" that, while logically compatible with the other definition as species to genus, nevertheless demands a different view of the medium. Whereas "poetry, in a general sense" that includes nonarts, really needs no medium at all, "poetry in a more restricted sense" must have a medium; and because "poetry in a more restricted sense" includes music, painting, and sculpture with their obviously physical media, Shelley recognizes, reluctantly, that his own art, too, has a medium that is at least analogous to the media of the others, though he tries to

minimize its "interposition." At times, indeed, as with the notion of "convertibility," he so minimizes the recalcitrance of language as to obliterate the medium altogether. Finally, we must suppose, only an empirical faithfulness to his own art allows him to depart so far from what he would clearly like to be able to say about artistic media. When he thus departs, he moves in the direction of the doubts and waverings noted earlier.

Though these waverings and doubts, even if providing occasional moments of illumination, ultimately prevent the treatise from cohering systematically, elsewhere they produce different results. The hopes for an "expression" that can soar above the earthly restrictions of language are at times dramatically juxtaposed in the poetry with a despair deeper than anything in the *Defence*. What reason, the "calculating faculty," is unable to make coherent in the *Defence* can approach imaginatively controlled oxymoron as shaped into poetry. Mary Shelley, for understandable reasons, called "Epipsychidion" her husband's "Italian Platonics," but the poem is occasionally more than that:

And we will talk, until thought's melody  
Become too sweet for utterance, and it die  
In words, to live again in looks, which dart  
With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,  
Harmonizing silence without a sound.

.....  
... Woe is me!

The winged words on which my soul would  
pierce

Into the height of Love's rare Universe,  
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire—  
[11.560-90]

According to the *Defence*, Shelley would have to say that here "the most glorious poetry . . . is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception." With this "conception" by his own account not available, to prove him right I copy out the line omitted above:

I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

<sup>1</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 179, 172.

<sup>2</sup> "Shelley," in Frank Jordan, ed., *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York, 1972), p. 357.

<sup>3</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> The most conspicuous uses are in Allen Tate ("Three Types of Poetry," in *Essays of Four Decades* [Chicago, 1968], pp. 173-96) and John Crowe Ransom (*The World's Body* [New York, 1938], pp. 120-28).

<sup>5</sup> *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Twayne's English Authors Series, No. 81 (New York, 1969), p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> "An Outline of Poetic Theory," in R. S. Crane et al, *Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1952), p. 564.

<sup>7</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), p. 403.

<sup>8</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, in William Heath, ed., *Major British Poets of the Romantic Period* (New York, 1973), p. 978. Subsequent page references are noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup> *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 128-29. I should add that Abrams *appears* to gloss the term in this way. In discussing Shelley's "Platonic literary history" he uses "inter-convertible" and then moves on to quote the passage (which occurs earlier than the "history") in which Shelley uses "convertible." I am not sure, in other words, precisely what corroboration Abrams provides.

<sup>10</sup> Stressing, like Saussure, the *arbitrary* relation between signifier and signified, Shelley may again seem a distant forerunner of Structuralism.

<sup>11</sup> When Shelley finds in language a "direct *representation* of . . . our internal being," he provides an instance of that historical process traced by Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* in which theories of poetry as imitation give way to theories of poetry as expression: language, rather than mirroring or representing the external world, is now regarded as mirroring the internal "lamp" itself. The terminology of the mirror describes the function of the lamp.

<sup>12</sup> "Introduction," *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston, in Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York, 1971), p. 530. "The manuscript notes for Hegel's lectures on aesthetics," Adams points out, "were published in 1835, four years after his death. The lectures were first given in 1820"—the year before Shelley wrote the *Defence*.

<sup>13</sup> "Shelley's View of Poetry," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909; rpt. Bloomington, Ind., 1961), p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> This minimal acknowledgment is seldom noticed. Earl J. Schulze, for example, after quoting Shelley's discussion of the medium, says flatly, "language is plastic, and words the direct representation of the activity of the poet's mind. The obedience of language to thought allows poetry to express

. . ." (*Shelley's Theory of Poetry: A Reappraisal* [The Hague, 1966], p. 104).

<sup>15</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (London, 1907), 1:202.

<sup>16</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, 2:11; "On the Principles of Genial Criticism," in Shawcross ed. of *Biographia Literaria*, 2:220.

<sup>17</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, 2:12.

<sup>18</sup> "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, pp. 19, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Harter Fogel, "The Imaginal Design of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*" (1948), in *The Permanent Pleasure: Essays on Classics of Romanticism* (Athens, Ga., 1974), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> "The Critical Monism of Cleanth Brooks," in *Critics and Criticism*, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1956), pp. 6, 64-76. In *Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 78-80, Krieger discusses Shelley's conflicting views of artistic media with a different emphasis from mine: he sees Shelley maintaining more consistently than I do that language does not "mediate," but he notes how Shelley's idea about translation is echoed in such modern theorists as Ransom and Sigurd Burckhardt.

<sup>22</sup> John W. Wright, *Shelley's Myth of Metaphor* (Athens, Ga., 1970), p. 7, n. 13.