

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Shelley's A Defence of Poetry Part -1

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ESSAY ON POETIC THEORY

A Defence of Poetry

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born to a wealthy family in Sussex, England. He attended Eton and Oxford, where he was expelled for writing a pamphlet championing atheism. Shelley married twice before he drowned in a sailing accident in Italy at the age of 29. His first wife committed suicide, and shortly thereafter he married his second wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, who was the author of *Frankenstein* and the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Among Shelley's closest friends were the other famous Romantic poets of the day, among them John Keats, whose death inspired Shelley's "Adonais," and Lord Byron.



Hello and welcome, to yet another session of this course on Literary Criticism. Today, we begin looking at a fresh essay, *A Defence of Poetry* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. And Shelley was one of the leading writers of the Romantic period and he had extensively written poetry as well as had composed a lot of critical works, as you know. And this work is extremely important as he was also responding to some of the dominant arguments which were raised by Thomas Love Peacock in 1820, in one of his essays titled *The Four Ages of Poetry*.

So, even in this essay, just like it is evident throughout the Romantic period, we find Shelley, accentuating the need to focus on the faculty of imagination. And imagination becomes the central functioning unit of the Romantic age as we know. And in their critical works also, in Wordsworth, in Coleridge, in Shelley, we find that imagination acquires a supreme central position in most of their arguments, in most of their notions about poetry, about how poetry is conceived and how poetry is analyzed and appreciated as well.

So Shelley was responding to an 1820 essay by Thomas Love Peacock, titled *The Four Ages of Poetry*. So there Peacock divided the history of English poetry into four historical, four different historical categories. And Shelley was extremely unhappy about the way in which those categories were laid out and this work is in defense of the oeuvre of poetry itself, the

body of poetry itself, the faculty of poetry, and he is also trying to raise certain arguments against the specific points that Peacock had in his work.

The four categories that Thomas Love Peacock pointed out were firstly an Iron Age followed by a Golden Age, then a Silver Age and a Bronze Age and there were particular kinds of writers and periods which were part of that as well. For instance, in the first age that he delineates- the Iron Age- it was of a primitive sentimentality. The poetry was extremely important largely for the historical curiosity, but according to him, there was very little skill. There was hardly any craftsmanship, which could be located in this earlier poetry, which he designated as Iron Age. There is also something very rustic, something very rudimentary about that kind of poetry without any skill. But of course, there is a lot of sentiments, there is a lot of those sorts of values attached to it.

And in the second stage, which is the Golden Age, he includes Shakespeare and he also talks about how the vitality which was part of the earlier period, the earlier Iron Age, that is also matched with an equal amount of skill, with technical prowess. So the Golden Age is where he places Shakespeare at the centre along with the many others who had been writing during that period.

And the Silver Age, it is a derivative of the kind of poetry, which had begun to flourish during the Golden Age, but it did not really become as great as a Golden Age as the term also suggests. And eventually, he comes to Bronze Age, which he refers to as the 'second child of poetry', which is largely composed with Romantic poets, which is where rightfully Shelley also takes a lot of offense in this kind of a periodization, in this kind of a categorization.

And so, when Thomas Love Peacock is talking about the Romantic poets of that time, whom he always refers to as part of the Bronze Age, poets who are part of the Bronze Age, he talks about them, the Romantic poets as ones who are entirely secluded from real life concerns, from real world concerns, who are living in and conceiving poetry in a different world altogether. And they are also seen as a set of people who look backward in time with nostalgia and the Wordsworthian nostalgia is quite legendary even today when we talk about it.

So they are seen as a set of people who look backward in time, who reject rationalism, who are heavily invested in merely the sentimental quality of poetry, merely the nostalgic quality of poetry, merely the emotional aspects which also find fruition in this faculty that they

identify imagination. So this is seen as something akin to the Iron Age, where there is a lot of sentimentality, but very little technical prowess, very little in terms of skill.

So, Shelley and others, they do take a lot of objection against this kind of periodization and this sort of division, which looks down upon the Romantic poets in a certain way and looks down upon the element of feeling and the element of emotion, which is attached to literature. And one of Peacock's arguments was that, as societies advanced, as modern societies went forward, one should always logically place reason about every other thing, every other faculty and placing imagination above everything, as a center of artistic creation- that, according to him, was a central fallacy as well.

And he argued that the Romantic poets in that sense were inferior, because they were not moving ahead along with the rest of the advanced civilizations, rest of the advanced modes of thinking and they were flawed in placing emotion, sentimentality and imagination at the centre instead of favoring reason over every other thing. So Shelley was greatly incensed by this article and Shelley, if you know, he was also known as Mad Shelley during his lifetime.

He was a very iconoclastic figure and he used to respond quite incisively against many things which were happening around him even in this work as we would see in the later segments. We will find that it is very political in multiple ways. He is perhaps the most political, he is perhaps the most articulate in that sense compared to the other Romantic poets.

So, here, we find Shelley composing this essay *A Defence of Poetry* as a retort primarily to Thomas Love Peacock and also to talk about the need to place imagination at the centre, the need to move away from reason at certain points of time.

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the Creator." The task of poets then is to interpret and present the poem; Shelley's metaphor here explicates: "Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted."



The next portion of Shelley's argument approaches the question of morality in poetry. To Shelley, poetry is utilitarian, as it brings civilization by "awaken[ing] and enlarg[ing] the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world." Shelley also addresses drama and the critical history of poetry through the ages, beginning with the classical period, moving through the Christian era, and into the middle ages until he arrives back in his present day, pronouncing the worth of poets and poetry as "indeed divine," and the significant role that poets play, concluding with his famous last line: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are c



So the vantage point of this essay is largely in situating the Romantic poets historically, because he also gives a very detailed sort of, he takes us through a historical trajectory in the first part and that is also in very direct opposition to the kind of arguments that Thomas Love Peacock puts forward in his essay *The Four Ages of Poetry*.

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of their experience and observations into poems. Shelley argues, that civilization
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advances and thrives with the help of poetry. This assumption then, through Shelley's own understanding, marks the poet as a prophet, not a man dispensing forecasts but a person who "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one." He goes on to place poetry in the column of divine and organic process: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth . . . the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator." The task of poets then is to interpret and present the poem; Shelley's metaphor here explicates: "Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted."

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So focusing on Shelley's essay, we find that he relies heavily on the way he defines his terms. And as we know, most of these Romantic poets, they wanted to give their own definitions to the existing words, whether it is poetry or the poet or imagination. We find them giving their own definitions and trying to demarcate those words within the boundaries that they had created and they largely worked to their advantage as well as we would see.

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Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" is unusual compared with similarly titled "defenses" of poetry. Shelley's essay contains no rules for poetry, or aesthetic judgments of his contemporaries. Instead, Shelley's philosophical assumptions about poets and poetry can be read as a sort of primer for the Romantic movement in general. In this essay, written a year before his death, Shelley addresses "The Four Ages of Poetry," a witty magazine piece by his friend, Thomas Love Peacock. Peacock's work teases and jokes through its definitions and conclusions, specifically that the poetry has become valueless and redundant in an age of science and technology, and that intelligent people should give up their literary pursuits and put their intelligence to good use. Shelley takes this treatise and extends it, turning his essay into more of a rebuttal than a reply. To begin, Shelley turns to reason and imagination, defining reason as logical thought and imagination as perception, adding, "reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things." From reason and imagination, man may recognize beauty, and it is through beauty that civilization comes. Language, Shelley contends, shows humanity's impulse toward order and harmony, which leads to an appreciation of unity and beauty.



So he begins by looking at these differences which are stated between rationality and poetical reasoning. And he is also providing this as a sort of a primer for the Romantic Movement in general, for us to be familiar with the many concepts that they are dealing with and also to tell us that just because they are talking about imagination, about feeling, about emotion, it does not mean that there is no logic to it. It does not mean that there is no historical background in which these emotions and these sort of feelings could be situated within the context of literature. And that is the larger purpose that this work rightly titled as *A Defence of Poetry* is also doing over here.

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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 *τοι ποσειν*, or the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *τοι λογισειν*, 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 qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, 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.



So Shelley begins his essay by focusing on these two words, which are seen as dichotomous words by Thomas Love Peacock and many others. So he talks about reason and imagination and tells us about the need to understand these two terms within a historical context as well as within this intellectual tradition that he is talking about. So this is how he begins his essay:

“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 a mind acting upon those thoughts as to color them with its own light”. So the mind is an inherent part in both these functions, whether it is reason or imagination. Imagination does not mean that you take the mind out of its functioning entirely.

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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 *τοιωσις*, or the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *λογισις*, 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 qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, 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.



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He tries to differentiate between these two terms in very logical ways. “Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is a perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and the imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as a body to the spirit, as a shadow to the substance”.

So, we find that Shelley’s view is more balanced compared to the view that Thomas Love Peacock and others who allegedly value reason over everything take. So we find that Shelley is able to strike a balance between these two terms and he is not necessarily devaluing reason, he is not necessarily arguing that reason should be pushed out of the window if you are focusing on, if you are highlighting imagination.

On the other hand, he is talking about how these two are inherent parts of the same system. And on the other hand, he is also telling us how these two are part of the same mind, which works in an artistic way, in a poetic way that these two can always coexist together. And that is something that he tries to show across this essay, that it is not entirely about meaningless emotions, it is not about superficial emotions, it is not also about responding to the situations by incorporating certain personal elements, which is what we would see later on when he begins to respond to certain very political, societal aspects such as slavery.



We find that the faculty of imagination that Romantics talk about, it is not entirely devoid of the practicality, but on the other hand, it tries to bring in, in very practical terms, the faculty of reason and as well as faculty of imagination. And we also find a sense of respect in the way in which Shelley is responding. He is not taking Thomas Love Peacock by name, he is not responding to his arguments directly. On the other hand, he is doing this very generic sort of defense which he thinks will be useful for posterity in multiple ways. So that is a kind of maturity also that Shelley shows in his work.

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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 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. 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 inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear



“Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the “expression of the imagination” and poetry is connate with the origin of men” .And this is very important. Imagination is not being seen as something, which is privately positioned, which is privately claimed by the Romantic poets alone. On the other hand, it is seen as the foundation of all kinds of poetry, regardless of age and the time period during which it was produced.

And to push this argument further, whether it is the Iron Age that Thomas Love Peacock is talking about or the Bronze Age and the inferiority of the Romantic poets that he is referring to, there is imagination everywhere. Without imagination, there cannot be poetry, because he defines poetry here very poetically as the “expression of the imagination”.

“Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal expressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing event 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 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”.

So he is giving this analogy from the field of music to show that it is not just about one aspect, it is not just about melody, it is also about harmony. So you cannot, at any point of time, say that just because human thoughts had been advancing, that is a time to move out of the faculty of imagination and focus only on reason, because that does not become, that will not become poetry at any point of time.

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And it is also about the quality of accommodation. And he talks about this extensively then he gives, continues to give, the example of the lyre about how the voice as well as emotions are extremely important when you are trying to appreciate a performance of the lyre.

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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 of 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 expressions; 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 coexist; 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

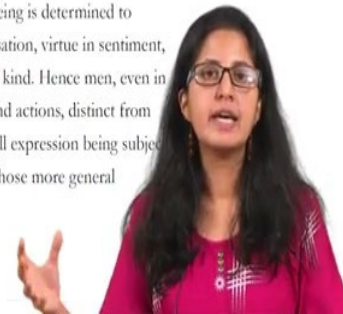


And further he says, “Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, become at once representation and the medium”. This is about art, any kind of literature, any kind of poetry becoming the representation as well as the medium.

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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 expressions; 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 coexist; 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



So, look at the ways in which he is bringing together various kinds of examples from society, from life, from different fields of studies and arguing that there is something very organic about the relation between reason and imagination. One cannot exist without the other and highlighting imagination does not mean that one is superseding the qualities of reason.

And having imagination as the centre of one's poetic expression does not mean that it is devoid of anything reasonable, anything rational. On the other hand, it accentuates the possibilities of reason, on the other hand it accentuates the various ways in which, the multifaceted ways in which the human brain, the human mind can work.

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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 of the effect to its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists in excess are poets; and the most universal sense of the word: and the pleasure resulting from the manner



He is also talking about the need and the existence of order within a work of art. “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.

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As that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful is very great”. So it is also about finding a kind of coherence within a certain work of art.

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And he says their language is very metaphoric, it is “vitaly metaphorical, that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words

which represent them become through their time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts”.

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time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts 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” [“De Augment. Scient.,” cap. i, lib. iii—Shelley]—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the store-house 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 form of the creations of poetry.



And here he also takes us to the historical framework which Thomas Love Peacock focuses on. And this is very interesting, because he begins by talking about the organic existence of reason and imagination, and now he is talking about something more concrete, something more rational, the way in which, in the same framework Thomas Love Peacock also had spoken about the four different ages of poetry.

And Shelley here argues that in the infancy of society, every author is necessarily a poet. So look at the all-encompassing, the very wide kind of definitions that a Romantic poet like Shelley is giving to the notion of poetry, the notion of literature, the notion of art. It is not limited to particular kinds of ages, but it is about the larger faculty that is at work. It is about the kind of union that is being facilitated in a thinking mind, in a rational mind, in an imaginative mind.

So, “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”. So here, he is trying to define who a poet is.

Everyone in the beginning, who dallied with language in some form or the other, who tried to bring out an artistic expression with the use of language, everyone is a poet, because it is still an infant stage. You still do not have the proper kind of yardsticks or frameworks to judge

who is a poet and who is not. So in the infancy of society, every author is a poet, and what makes a poet? “To be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful”.

So he is highlighting the quality of imagination, the quality of emotional, sentimental response to life, to society and how that was integral to the formation, to the foundations of the ways in which a poet was made, how poetry was conceived during the infant stages of society. And such a historical understanding, such a historical perception is extremely important in order to qualify our current responses to these notions about poetry and the idea of the poet as well.

And he talks about two kinds of relations, two kinds of dialogues, which are present in this process. First, between existence and perception. There is something out there and there is a way in which the poet perceives it. And secondly, between perception and expression. So, I hope, you are able to see the process which is being explained over here, even though he is talking about a certain kind of poetry which is still at its inception, a kind of poet who still does not have a proper model for him or her to imitate. So, it is about the world which is out there.

The poet who is trying to understand that world which is outside, which is existing, that is existence. So, there is existence and the poet receives it in his mind's eye, through his imagination, through his various faculties. And you have to give it when you are thinking about this, you need to understand that even though the society was not very advanced during its infant stages, there was still man or the human mind was still invested with a certain kind of rationality.

Reason was always there, irrespective of the advancements, or irrespective of the changes which had not yet taken over the foundations of human society. So coming back to this point, the first relation he identifies is between existence and the way in which the poet perceives this world which exists outside. And secondly, it is between perception, the way in which the poet has perceived it, and the way in which he is able to articulate it, to express it. So only when these two processes are entirely complete, the poet's work reaches completion, the poet's work find visibility.

So it is not entirely about infant, juvenile feelings, it is about identifying what is out there, identifying what exists there, perceiving it and then processing what has been perceived and expressing it. “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 form of the creations of poetry”.

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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 form of the creations of poetry.

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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



So there is a historical process and to say that the earlier processes were devoid of reason, it is just sentimental writing and it did not have the technical prowess, is to completely negate the value of this historicity. So here we find a Romantic poet like Shelley, investing heavily in identifying the historical conditions and that also becomes very important for his conception of poetry for the idea of, for the definitions of poetry and poets which he gives out.

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“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”. If you remember, towards the end of this work, he also refers to the poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world. He does not have a particular time period in mind, he does not say that the Romantic poets are the unacknowledged legislators of life.

On the other hand, he is always talking about a general sense of poetry, the kind of faculty which the human mind is endowed with. Continuing with this, he is identifying the poet in this form as one who perceives, that becomes imagination, and the one who is able to express this. So perception and articulation, perception and expression becomes extremely important in highlighting the organic quality of reason and imagination as well.

So, “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 expression of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence, all original religions are allegorical”.

This trajectory is very fascinating. He talks about the need to identify this organic union of reason and imagination, of the rational thinking and the thinking of the mind, which is supposedly more logical. He is encouraging us to see the organic unity which is built into this and then talking about how in the infant stage, right from the infant stage of every society, there is also a conception of religion and how do you begin to comprehend that, unless you are able to identify the organic way in which reason and imagination are closely connected.

“All original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, like the Janus, have a double face of false and true”. It is referring to the Greek gods and those allegories which were part of religion, it was part of giving them order, it was part of instituting certain kinds of laws within the society. “Poets according to the circumstances of the age and nation which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets”.

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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 unchangeable, which, though infinitely remote, shines upon all that exists, as heaven shines upon the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.



So this historical tracing becomes extremely important. Here, unlike Peacock, Shelley is not really bothered about the kind of output, which was produced by these poets. He is not trying to evaluate them in an objective way. On the other hand, he is trying to understand their contributions in connection with their function at every point of time. The kind of function, the kind of role that they played in different historical points of time, which incidentally is also a better way of looking at literature, better way of evaluating the kind of products of different artistic ages.

So poet essentially, comprises and unites both these characters, about being legislators and prophets. And again, we see this organic quality of the reason and imagination coming together. Legislators need order, it is about very objective things and the prophets, it is more esoteric, there is something more romantic about the way in which prophecy works. It is also very metaphysical at some level, it is also beyond human comprehension, and it is also not something that everyone is gifted with.

On the other hand, the legislators, they also operate within a set of rules. It does not mean that it does not need any skills. It is also about bringing an order in an artistic way, in an imaginative way, because that is how the human societies began to function from their infancy, from the stage of infancy onwards.

So by giving a lot of examples from different fields of study, and bringing in these otherwise not so coherent things together, we find the Shelley is really able to take his argument forward in a historical sense as well as in a very logical and rational sense.

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“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”. He is also trying to understand the order of religion and differentiate it from what is part of superstition that is also very important given the age of enlightenment, through which he is also living.

“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.

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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



The grammatical forms which express the moods of time and the difference of person, the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry; and the chorus of Aeschylus, the Book of Job, 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 sculpture, painting and music are, illustrations still more decisive". So look at these three works that he is quoting over here. The choruses of Aeschylus, the Book of Job, Dante's "Paradise". The Book of Job is a central part of the religious text of the Christians-Bible, and the other two are part of two different, entirely different traditions. And he is talking about poetry, he is talking about mythology, he is talking about religion, he is talking about the aspects of faith which is also built into it. And all of these things have been conceived by the human mind.

And it is difficult to say whether this is just poetry, this is just prophecy, this is just religion and not the other. There is an organic way in which many things come together into the making of this work. The perception of this work, the conception of this work and our understanding of this work is also caught within these myriad forms of expression. It is also caught within these myriad of ways in which the work had been conceived, it is difficult to separate one from the other in that sense.

And the same, he says, could be said about sculpture, painting, music, because the illustrations are still more decisive over there. So, in this first part, he manages to argue, he manages to convince us with this argument that the reason and imagination, they are not two different things entirely, but they are actually supposed to coexist together. There is an

organic way in which they come together and this has been cited from historical times. And there is enough proof that one could provide from poetry, from religion, from sculpture, from music, and that is a way in which the human mind works as well.

By focusing the faculty of the mind above everything, he is able to accentuate the quality of imagination, as well as to offer a very valid counterpoint to the likes of Thomas Love Peacock, who argue that reason and imagination are two separate things; and reason should always be overvalued, over imagination, that the moment one begins to value imagination more, reason is at stake.

So here through this very coherent sort of foundation that he is laying out, Shelley is also saying that just because one is focusing on imagination, does not mean that reason should be overlooked, that reason should be compromised. Because there is an organic way in which both work and poetry is the finest expression of this organic unity, this organic union.

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"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 sculpture, painting, and music are illustrations still more decisive.



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



So I leave you with this today. I encourage you to read through the rest of the section, and we will take a look at how he begins to talk about these different forms of definitions and how he takes us through this journey to arrive at a more political and more concise argument about what poets and poetry is supposed to do in the larger body of the society. So thank you for your time, and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.