A Defence of Poetry Study Guide

Summary

Readers familiar with other great "defenses" of poetry may find Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* unusual, even confusing. There is little practical analysis of the elements of good literary work. There is no methodical history of poetry, as one reads in Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (1595). There are no pronouncements about rules of composition. Instead, Shelley offers a philosophical analysis of the role of the poet as a special kind of person, one who can see the essential harmonies of the world beneath the discordant images people find in their everyday lives. Whereas Aristotle, Sidney, or John Dryden see the poet as a superb craftsman capable of delighting readers through the masterful blending of form and content, Shelley assigns the poet a higher calling: the revelation of truth about life and the promotion of universal betterment.

These high claims are justified by Shelley's insistence that the production of poetry is not simply a craft. Rather, the true poet is a visionary who is inspired to create art as a means of revealing something about the nature of the world. The poem itself is merely an attempt to reproduce that vision. Such claims have been misinterpreted, and Shelley has been accused of promoting automatic writing or of devaluing the importance of craftsmanship. On the contrary: Shelley sees the imagination as a shaping power that gives form to the poet's vision, and only those who master form can hope to convey their vision to readers. Similarly, claims that Shelley is a promoter of emotional poetry are wrongheaded; he is insistent that the practice of poetry involves the intellect as well as the heart. He believes that great poets have a special gift that allows them to use the materials of their own time (the forms and subjects that might appeal to their contemporary readers), but transcend the limits of time and place to speak to people of all ages.

In this essay Shelley is defending poetry—"my mistress, Urania"—against the attack by Thomas Love Peacock in "The Four Ages of Poetry," published in the first and only issue of the *Literary Miscellany* in 1820. The polemical exchange came to nothing, for *A Defence of Poetry* remained unpublished until 1840. In his essay, Peacock had elaborated the familiar figure of the Golden and Silver Ages of classical poetry into four (Iron, Gold, Silver, and Brass), skipped over "the dark ages," and repeated the succession in English poetry. Peacock's point was that poetry never amounts to much in civilized society; Shelley's defense is that poetry is essential. Their views were antithetical and neither made contact with the other: Peacock's attack is a boisterous satire, Shelley's defense is an elevated prose poem.

Nevertheless, Peacock's article is still a necessary preface to Shelley's arguments, not because one prompted the other or because Shelley adopted Peacock's historical method in the middle section of his essay, but because, as a pair, they show the opposing preferences of the older public for eighteenth century wit and of the younger for enthusiasm. Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry" has also the merit of being amusing; Shelley is never amusing. Peacock's argument is that poetry belongs properly to primitive societies, that as they become civilized they become rational and nonpoetical; hence it was not until the late seventeenth century that England equaled, in the work of William Shakespeare and John Milton, the Golden Age of

Homeric Greece. Early nineteenth century England seemed, to him, to have reached the Age of Brass in poetry but a kind of Golden Age in science; therefore, poetry should be left to the primitive societies where it belongs. Peacock is most amusing in his picture of the first Age of Iron, in which the bard of the tribal chief "is always ready to celebrate the strength of his arm, being first duly inspired by that of his liquor." Apart from Homer, Peacock respects no poet, not even Shakespeare, who mixed his unities and thought nothing of "deposing a Roman Emperor by an Italian Count, and sending him off in the disguise of a French pilgrim to be shot with a blunderbuss by an English archer." Peacock's jest turns sour as he tires of his figure, and his strictures on contemporary poetry become a diatribe of which the gist is that "a poet of our times is a semibarbarian in a civilized community." Shelley, to whom Peacock sent a copy of his essay, was stirred to write his only prose statement on his craft. In it he came to the memorable conclusion that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

A Defence of Poetry falls into three parts. First, Shelley presents an argument that all people are poets in some degree, for poetry is an innate human faculty; hence, it is seen in all societies at all times and to eternity. In the second part, he attempts the historical proof, which he abandons in the third to make a subjective and poetic affirmation of the perpetual presence and ennobling virtue of poetry. In presenting his beliefs, Shelley uses the ideas that inspire his poems and attempts to codify them from the base Peacock had given him. Peacock could begin at once with his first age, however; Shelley found it necessary to begin by defining his notion of poetry. Two major ideas run through this first section and are reflected in the rest of the essay: the Platonic idea of mimesis, in which the imagination responds to the eternal verities it glimpses behind the material form, and the eighteenth century idea of the "sympathetic imagination" that, of its own initiative, extends itself and assumes an empathy with external objects and beings. The first idea leads Shelley to assert the superiority of the poet as the most active in using the glimpses of truth and conveying them to lesser beings for their uplifting; for this reason, the poet is the most powerful influence on humankind, a "legislator." The second idea gives the poet an insight into the ills of humankind which, once understood, can be corrected; here is the second meaning of "legislator."

The first part presented is in two sections, dealing first with the mimetic, then with the expressive powers of poetry, which powers are part of the definition of poetry; the other two parts of the definition are contained in four paragraphs on the form of poetry, especially on its use of language, the medium that makes it superior to other art media and which is called "measured" in contradistinction to "unmeasured" language or prose. The whole essay is prefaced by four paragraphs that define poetry in the largest or organic sense, not by its mechanics. These paragraphs go to the heart of the difference between Peacock and Shelley.

Shelley begins with a distinction between reason and imagination, leaving to the former the work of numbering, analyzing, and relating objects; the imagination perceives the similitude of objects in their innate values, not in their appearance, and synthesizes these values, presumably, into a valid and Platonic One or Truth. The synthetic principle of the imagination is poetry; the individual is compared to "an Aeolian lyre," subject to impressions external and internal but possessing an inner principle (poetry) that produces not simply melody but harmony. Poetry is thus both the name of a form of language (measured) and of the power of producing it and benefiting from the poem. Shelley asserts that poets are "the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society" because they discover the laws of harmony and become "legislators" by giving these laws the form of a poem. The poetic product or poem may be an act of mimesis, but the act proceeds from the poetic faculty highly developed in the poet and contained in all people: "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth."

The argument in the second section of the first part, devoted to the effects of poetry on society, has been anticipated in the foregoing analysis. *A Defence of Poetry*, as an "apologia," could well end at that point, but Shelley wanted to convince Peacock that his theory has external evidence. This he offers in the second part of the essay.

The historical method had already been touched on in Shelley's example of the propensity of the savage or child to imitate the impressions it receives, as a lyre produces melody only. Shelley's reading of history is as willful as Peacock's in his assertion that the morality of an age corresponds to the goodness or badness of its poetry; he adduces Greek classical drama as an evidence of a healthy society and Hellenic bucolic poetry as a sign of decay when the poets ceased to be the acknowledged legislators of the Alexandrian Hellenes. In order to cope with the same progression of health and decay in the literature of Rome, which would seem to prove Peacock's scheme, Shelley shifts the whole cycle into "episodes of that cyclic poem written by time upon the memories of men." He encounters further difficulty in coping with Christianity, for, by Shelley's theory, Jesus must be a great poet: "The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person, are all instinct with the most vivid poetry." Something went wrong in the Dark Ages, which brought "the extinction of the poetic principle . . . from causes too intricate to be here discussed." Shelley feels safer with Dante Alighieri and John Milton: "But let us not be betrayed from a defence into a critical history of poetry."

After abandoning the historical method which, had he followed Peacock step by step, would have brought him up to his contemporaries, Shelley returns to his defence by attacking "the promoters of utility" and, by implication, Peacock. To the utilitarian objection that poetry simply produces pleasure and that pleasure is profitless, Shelley asserts that the pleasure of poetry lies not in its superficial melody but in its innate harmony, alone capable of checking "the calculating faculty" that has already produced "more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies." Shelley follows this with a paragraph that summarizes the duality of the "poetic faculty"; by synthesis it "creates new materials of knowledge and power and pleasure," and by its expressive powers it reproduces those materials "according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good."

Shelley's peroration, his personal and poetic justification for poetry, opens with three paragraphs beginning: "Poetry is indeed something divine"; "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds"; "Poetry turns all things to loveliness." This is the moving genius of Adonais. Searching for the best proof to defend poetry from the rationalizations of Peacock, Shelley follows the prompting of his own "poetic principle" in concluding *A Defence of Poetry* with a sustained lyric in prose that Peacock could never match. The power of this essay is still inspiring. It constitutes Shelley's best claim outside his verse to be a "legislator" to the world.

Additional Summary: Summary

Shelley wrote *A Defence of Poetry* as a reply to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). Peacock thought that poetry grows less relevant as society advances and that Romantic poetry is barbaric and childish. Shelley admitted that some people and ages are less poetical than others, but he argued vehemently that poetry is humanity's highest mental faculty, relevant to every age. Shelley sees poetry as the power of understanding and imagining new combinations of thought. Thus, it is the source of all knowledge and progress. He rejects small-minded definitions of poetry as word games played with rhymes and meters. Even prose can be poetry inasmuch as it expresses the imagination.

A poet sees a world not yet seen by most people. He grasps order hidden beneath chaos, truth scrambled by superstition, beauty smeared by corruption. Poets create new forms of opinions and action that enable society to progress. Thus, they wield more power in society than politicians and business executives. "Poets," Shelley declares, "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." For example, Dante gave medieval Europe a new Christian myth that made it less violent and more free. Ultimately, poetry enlarges the mental and moral capacities of humankind.

Shelley contrasts poetry with reason. Reason is calculating selfhood; poetry, the impulse toward pleasure and love. "Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon

of the world," he states. For Peacock to insist on poetry serving commerce is to turn everything upside down. Reason is under humanity's will, but poetry works under an invisible influence, like the wind, which makes coal burn brighter. Similarly, inspiration fans the flame of a poet's imagination, and he or she writes as if under the direction of an outside force. Such a heated exercise of imagination is, for Shelley, better than the resulting poem, for the poem is necessarily a thing; the poem, however, can impart to others something of the poet's contact with a new truth.

In an age of commerce or an age of reason, when the unpoetical principle of selfish greed gains ascendancy, even the poets may grow less and less poetical. Yet poetry has the power to flash out again, like "a sword of lightning . . . which consumes the scabbard that would contain it." Finally, in rebuttal to Peacock's attacks on Romantic poets, Shelley predicts, rightly, that they will be remembered for their intellectual achievements. What he says of their works is surely true of his own as well, that they are impossible to read "without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words."

Additional Summary: Bibliography

Further Reading

Clark, David Lee, ed. *Shelley's Prose: Or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*. 3d ed. London: Fourth Estate, 1988. The introduction examines Shelley's theory of poetry within the broader context of his ideas about religion and other aspects of his philosophy. Contains an annotated text of *A Defence of Poetry* and an annotated bibliography.

Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. Examines theories of inspiration in Western poetics since the Enlightenment. Analyzes *A Defence of Poetry* to describe how Shelley depicted the process of composition as a state of subjective crisis and transformation.

Daiches, David. *Critical Approaches to Literature*. 2d ed. New York: Longman, 1987. Discusses the Platonic idealism of *A Defence of Poetry* in terms of poetry and social morality, language and imagination. Relates the essay's ideas to those of Sir Philip Sidney, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Duffy, Cian. *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Focuses on Shelley's fascination with sublime natural phenomena and how this interest influenced his writing and ideas about political and social reform.

Fry, Paul H. *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983. A chapter discusses the relation of *A Defence of Poetry* to the tenets of Longinus, John Dryden, and others. Closely analyzes the language, ideas, and theoretical basis of the essay; considers the essay one of the best works on the debate between poetry and science.

Jordan, John E., ed. *A Defence of Poetry*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and *The Four Ages of Poetry*, by Thomas Love Peacock. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. Introduction interprets the significance of Shelley's essay. Copious notes explain the text and connect it to the works of previous writers.

Morton, Timothy, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Ten essays on various aspects of Shelley's life and work, including Shelley as a lyricist, dramatist, storyteller, political poet, and translator, and the literary reception of his writings. The references to *A Defence of Poetry* are listed in the index.

Quotes: "Poetry Is The Record Of The Best And Happiest Moments Of The Happiest And Best Minds"

Context: One of the greatest British poets of the Platonic tradition, Shelley wrote this long, lyrical statement of the nature of poetry and the role of the poet in modern society as a reply to Thomas Love Peacock's humorous satire of Romantic poetry, The Four Ages of Poetry (1820). Unlike the mundane Peacock, who thought that poetry was merely a toy for adults, Shelley believes that the poetic experience is one that comes to a man from the gods and tears the veils from ordinary nature so that the poet can see the hidden truths of the universe. Since such vision is denied to the average man, the poet also is the true seer and legislator of the world to whom all men must look if they seek truth or order. Well aware of the implications of this assumption, Shelley claims that poetry is divine in origin and comes only through the gift of inspiration; he also adds that, since the poet is the instrument of the divine, the most moral and best men alone have been raised to the role of poet, as the result of divine grace.

> Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. . . . It is, as it were, the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. . . .

Quotes: "Poets Are The Unacknowledged Legislators Of The World"

Context: In A Defense of Poetry, Shelley states his Platonic theory of the art. To him, poetry is imagination–an awareness of the value and meaning of the ideas produced by reason. Poetry is "the centre and circumference of knowledge," and the poet is a "law-giver" who will lead mankind to freedom. Great poetry is the "herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution." For during such an awakening men have the power "of communicating and receiving intense . . . conceptions regarding man and nature." The poets themselves may not be aware of (or may even be hostile to) "that spirit of good of which they are the ministers." Their words are charged with an "electric life" which astonishes even them; "for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age":

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.