like Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England, which produces the finest poetry, the Homer and the Shakespeares. From then on, however, the increasing encroachment of scientific knowledge limits the scope of poetry. There arrives an "age of silver," a polished and classicizing civilization that gives rise to the Virgils and the Milton and Pepys. Finally comes the decadence of the "age of brass," in which poetry is more or less a nostalgic archaism, like the later Roman Empire — or the English Romantic period. At last, the destruction of civilization itself — the fall of the Roman Empire in the first cycle — puts an end to the decay and allows a new age of iron to begin.

The bulk of A Defence of Poetry is a reply to Peacock's attack on Romantics and Romanticism, which takes the form of a progressive (rather than a cyclical) theory of history and of the poetry that grew up alongside it (in and Shelley's view helped to form) political institutions.

Selected Bibliography

A Defence of Poetry

Or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled "The Four Ages of Poetry"

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 colour 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 ground of the principle of synthetic, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is due to the power of imagination, 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 results. Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similarities of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination, and poetry is coterminous with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an ocean 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 infusion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are what poetry is to higher objects. The savages (for the savage is to ages what the child is to youths) 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 passions. 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 initiatory 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 considerations which might involve an enquiry into the principles of society itself, and restrict ourselves to the manner in which the imagination is expressed upon its forms.

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 of 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 delightful results: but the diversity is not sufficiently marked, as that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word, and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks
the before unpreheeded relations of things, and
perpetuates their apprehension, until the words
which represent them, become through time, signs
for portions or classes of thoughts intended or pic-
tures of integral thought; and, then, no new poets
should arise to create fresh the associations which
have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to
all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.
These simulacra or relations are finely said by
Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature
impressed upon the various subjects of the world"—and he considers the faculty which per-
ceives them as the storehouse of axioms common
to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every
author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the
tree and the beautiful, in a word the good which
exists in the relation, subsisting, first between exis-
tence and perception, and secondly between per-
ception and expression. Every original language
near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic
poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the dis-
tinction of terms are the words of a later age, and
are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations
of Poetry.
But Poets, or those who imagine and express
this indistinguishable order, are not only the authors
of language and of music, of the dance and archi-
tecture and statuary and painting: they are the
institutors of laws, and the founders of civil soci-
ety and the inventors of the arts of life and the
teachers, who draw into a certain proportioning
with the beautiful and the true that partial appre-
ception of the agencies of the invisible world
which is called religion. Hence all original reli-
gions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and
like Janus have a double face of false and true.
Poets, according to the circumstances of the
time 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. 3 For he not only
beholds intensely the present as it is, and dis-
covers those laws, according to which present things
could 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 prophetesses of 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
pretension of superstitious priests which would
make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than
prophecy an attribute of poetry. A Poet partici-
pates in the eternal, the individual, and the one; as far
as his conceptions, time and place and as relates to his conceptions, time and place and
number are not. The grammatical forms which
express the moods of time, and the difference
of persons and the distinction of place are convert-
ible with respect to the highest poetry without
injuring it as poetry, and the characters of Aschy-
lus, and the book of Job, and Dante's Paradise
would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did
not forbid citation. The creations of sculpture,
painting, and music, are illustrations still more
deductive.
Language, colour, form, and religious and
civil habits of action are all the instraments and
materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by
that figure of speech which considers the effect as
a synonyme 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 colour, form, or motion, and
more plastic and obedient to the control of that
faculty of which it is the creation. For language is
arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has
relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials,
materials and instruments of art, have relations
among each other, which limit and arrest the
between conception and expression. The former
is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud
which enfables, the light of which are mediums of
communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters and musicians, although the
intrinsick powers of the grand masters of these arts, may yield in no degree to that of those who have
employed language as the hieroglyphe of their
thoughts, has never equalled that of poets in the
restricted sense of the term; as two performers of
great skill will produce unequal effects from a
guitar and a harp. The fame of legislators and
founders of religions, so long as their institutions
last, alone seems to exceed that of poets in the
restricted sense; but it can scarcely be a question
whether, if we deduct the celebrity which their
flattery of the gross opinions of the vulgar usually
conciliates, together with that which belonged to
them in their higher character of poets, any excess
will remain.
We have thus circumscribed the meaning of the
word Poetry within the limits of that art which is
the most familiar and the most perfect expression
of the faculty itself: it is necessary however to make
the circle still narrower, and to determine the
distinction between measured and unmeasured
language; for the popular division into prose and
verse is inadmissable in accurate philosophy.
Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both
between each other and towards that which they
represent, and a perception of the order of those
relations has nothing to do with the conception of
the art of writing. But the popular division is
connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a
certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of
sound, without which it were not poetry, and which
is scarcely less indispensable to the communi-
cation of its influence, than the words them-
soever, without reference to that peculiar order.
Hence the variety of (transliteration) 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 transmute 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 Isabell.
An observation of the regular mode of the
recession of this harmony in the language of poets,
and that of prose, is so obvious, and so distinct
that there is no need of producing any argument on
the subject. But every reader must have observed,
that the regularity which is in prose, is greater in
the production metre, or a certain system of traditional
forms of harmony of language. Yet it is by no
means essential that a poet should accommodate
his language to this traditional form, so that the
harmony which exists may be observable. The prac-
tise is indeed convenient and popular, and to be
preferred, especially in such composition as includes
much form and action: but every great
poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of
his predecessors in the exact structure of his pecul-
lar versification. The distinction between poets
and prose writers is a vulgar error. The distinction
between philosophers and poets has been antici-
pated. Plato was essentially a poet — the truth and
splendor of his imagery and the melody of his
language is the most incommensurate with any idea
that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dra-
matic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kin-
dle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and
action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of
rhythm which would include, under different forms,
the varied pasages of his style. Cicero sought to imitate the cadence of his periods but
with little success; Lord Bacon was a poet. 4 His
language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which
determines the sense, no less than the almost super-
human wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the
intellect; it is a strain which distends, and then
bursts the circumference of the hearer's mind, and
pours itself forth together with it into the universal
element with which it has perpetual sympathy. All
the authors of the elder period are not necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as
their words unveil the permanent analogy of the
life of a science. Thus, for example, the
Elements of Euclid and the New Atlantis are
authors of the very loftiest power.
A poem is the very image of life expressed in
its eternal truth. There is this difference between
a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of
isolated facts, which has no bond of connection
than time, place, circumstance, cause and
effect; the other is the creation of actions accord-
ing to the unchangeable forms of human nature,
as existing in the mind of the creator, which is
itself the image of all other minds. The one is par-
tial, and applies only to a definite period of time.

3See the Filius Labyrinthus and the Essay on Death partic-
ularly. [Shelley]

4See the Filius Labyrinthus and the Essay on Death partic-
ularly. [Shelley]
and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself a germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, strips of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of Poetry, and develops new and wonderful applications to the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epiphanies have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it. The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful, as Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

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

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

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their audiences are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the seer, and the wise of many generations. A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his

audition are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding order was reared; they were the soil in which all admirables of Homer embryoled the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector and Ulysses: the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism and persevering devotion to an object, were revealed to the depths in these immortal creations; the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring them imitated, and from imitating identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected, that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch under nature has its object lesson in which exists in lieu of errors; Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled Image of unknown evil before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the terrors in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the external proportions of their beauty. An epic of dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the antient armour of the modern uniform around his body, whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature cannot be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and impress the power of attracting and assimilating of their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as Nature strengthens a limb. A Poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign the glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminutive, inasmuch as they compel us to advert to this purpose.

Homer and the cyclic poets were followed at a certain interval by the dramatic and lyrical Poets of Athens, who flourished contemporaneously with all that is most perfect in the kindred expostations of the poetical faculty, architecture, painting, music, the dance, sculpture, philosophy, and we may add the forms of civil life. For although the scheme of Athenian society was deformed by many imperfections which the poetry existing in Chivalry and Christianity have erred from the habits and institutions of modern Europe; yet never at any other period has so much energy, beauty, and virtue, been developed; never was blind strength and stubborn form so disciplined and rescued subject to the degree in which it will less repugnant to the dictates of the beautiful and the true, as during the century which preceded the death of Socrates. Of no other epoch in the history of our species have we records and fragments stamped so visibly with the image of the divinity in man. But it is Poetry alone, in form, in action, or in language, which has rendered this epoch memorable above all others, and the storehouse of examples to everlasting time. For written poetry existed at that epoch simultaneously with the other arts, and it is an idle enquiry to demand which gave and which received the light, which all as from a common focus have scattered over the darkest periods of succeeding time. We know no more of cause and effect than a constant conjuction of events: the same name is ever found it hides the truth, and the other arts contribute to the happiness and perfection of man. I appeal to what has already been established to distinguish between the cause and the effect.

It was at the period here adverted to, that the Drama had its birth; and however a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that
the art itself never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens. For the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institutions, to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest ideals of passion and of power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity one towards another. On the modern stage a few only of the elements capable of expressing the image of the poet's conception are applied at once. We have tragedy without music and dancing; and music and dancing without the highest impersonations of which they are the fit accompaniment, and both without religion and solemnity. Religious institution has indeed been usually banished from the stage. Our system of divesting the actor's face of a mask, on which the many expressions appropriate to his dramatic character might be moulded into one permanent and unchanging expression, is favourable only to a partial and inharmonious effect: it is fit for nothing but a monologue, where all the attention may be directed to some great master of ideal mimicy. The modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy, though liable to great abuse in point of practise, is undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic mode, but the comedy should be said as in King Lear, universal, ideal, and sublime. It is perhaps the intervention of this principle which determines the balance in favour of King Lear against the Oedipus Tyrannus or the Agamemnon, or, if you will the trials with which they are connected; unless the intense power of the choral poetry, especially that of the latter, should be considered as restoring the equilibrium. King Lear, if it can sustain this comparison, may be judged to be the most perfect specimen of the art existing in the world; in spite of the narrow conditions to which the poet was subjected by the ignorance of the philosophy of the Drama which has prevailed in modern Europe. Calderon in his

religious Autan1 has attempted to fulfill some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare; such as the establishing a relation between the drama and religion, and the accommodating them to music and dancing; but he omits the observation of conditions still more important, and more is lost than gained by a substitution of the rigidly-defined and ever-repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition for the living impersonations of the truth of human passion. But we digress. The Author of the Four Ages of Poetry2 has prudently omitted to dispute on the effect of the Drama upon life and manners. For, if I know to ascribe any credit by the device of his For, I may not subscribe Philectetes or Agamemnon or Othello3 upon mine to put to flight the giant sophisms which have exchanged him as the mirror of intolerable light, though on the arm of one of the weakest of the Patulins, could blind and scatter, whole armies of vacillers and pangs. The connection of scenic exhibitions with the improvement or corruption of the manners of men, has been universally recognized; in other words, the presence or absence of poetry in its most perfect and universal form has been found to be connected with good and evil in conduct and habit. The corruption which has been imputed to the drama as an effect, begins, when the poetry employed in its constitution ends: I appeal to the history of manners whether the periods of the growth of the one and the decline of the other have not corresponded with an exactness equal to any other example of moral cause and effect. The drama at Athens, or whereover else it may have approached to its perfection, consisted with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age. The tragedies of the Athenian poets are in mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, strip of all but that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become. The imagina-

1 The Agamemnon by Aeschylus is the first play of the Orestean trilogy. Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus is not part of an extant trilogy, though he wrote plays connected with the Oedipus story twenty years earlier (Antigone) and twenty years later (Oedipus at Colonus).

2 The author of the Spanish dramatic Calderon (1600-1681) wrote religious allegorical dramas.

3 Shelley's friend, Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866).

4 Tragic protagonists of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare, respectively.

loved him whom he loved, and yet beloved him whom he loved not. When the passion is thus divested of its wilfulness, men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their own. In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected on that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of the author is its instrument, and makes them with its own hand the perfect example of life; and it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once been in connection with the corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles. And this is true with respect to poetry in its most extended sense: all language, institution and form, require not only to be produced but to be sustained: the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, less than as regards the influence on men.

Civil war, the spoils of Asia, and the fatal pre-

dominance first of the Macedonian, and then of the Roman arms were so many symbols of the extinction or suspension of the creative faculty in Greece. The bucolic writers, who found patronage under the lettered tyrants of Sicily and Egypt, were the latest representatives of its most glorious reign. Their poetry is intensely melodic; like the odour of the tuberose, it overcomes and sickens the spirit with excess of sweetness; whilst the
poetry of the preceding age was as a meadow-gate of June which mingles the fragrance of all the flowers of the field, and adds a quickening and harmonious spirit of its own which endows the culture and industry of its own. Poetry in the sense of the sweet music of the Muses, was less cold, with the poems of Theocritus, were less cold, with the poems of Bacchylides less cold, the poems of Homer, and the poems of Virgil, with the poems of Homer, and the poems of Virgil, was more than the remnant of their tribe. Poets must utter the hope of the fabric of human society before Poetry can ever cease. The sacred links of that chain were never entirely broken. Poets, which descending through the minds of many men is attached to those great minds, whence as from a magnet the ineffable influence is sent forth, which at once connects, animates and sustains the life of all. It is the faculty which contains within itself the seeds of life and death. Poets, as the authors of its yet unrestored social renovation. And let us not overlook the effects of the bucolic and erotic poetry within the limits of the sensibility of those to whom it was addressed. They have perceived the beauty of those immortal compositions, simply as fragments, as isolated portions, as the authors of these immortal dramas, the imagination beholding the beauty of this order, created it out of itself according to its own idea: the consequence was empire, and the reward ever-living fame. These things are not less poetry, quia current vate sacro. They are the episodes of the cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of the Past, like an inspired rhymed史诗s, fills the theatre of everlasting generations with their harmony.

At length the antient system of religion and manners had fulfilled the circle of its revolution. And the world would have fallen into utter anarchy and darkness, but that there were found poets among the authors of the Christian and Chaldean systems of manners and religion, who created forms of opinion and action never before conceived; which, copied into the imaginations of men, became as generals to the bewildered armies of their thoughts. It is foreign to the present purpose to touch upon the evil produced by these systems: except that we protest, on the ground of the principles already established, that no portion of it can be imputed to the poetry they contain.

It is not to be supposed that poetry of the ancients has been lost. Lucanias is the highest, and Virgil is the best. Lucretius is a very high sense, a creator. The chosen delicacy of the expressions of the latter is as a mist of light which conceals from us the intense and exceeding beauty of his conceits from the taste of those less poetical than those of Greece, as the shadow is less vivid than the substance. Hence poetry in Rome, seemed to follow rather than accompany the perfection of political and domestic society. The true Poetry of Rome lived in its institutions; for whatever of beautiful, true and majestic they contained could have sprung only from the faculties which created the order in which they consist. The life of Camillus, the death of Regulus; the expectation of the Senators, in their godlike state, of the victorious Gauls; the refusal of the Republic to make peace with Hannibal after the battle of Cannae, were not the consequences of a refined calculation of the probable personal advantage to result from such a rhythm and order in the shews of life, to those who were at once the poets and the actors of these immortal dramas. The imagination beholding the beauty of this order, created it out of itself according to its own idea: the consequence was empire, and the reward ever-living fame. These things are not less poetry, quia current vate sacro. They are the episodes of the cyclic poem written by Time upon the memories of the Past, like an inspired rhymed史诗s, fills the theatre of everlasting generations with their harmony.

A certain period after the prevalence of a system of opinions founded upon those promulgated by him, the three forms into which Plato had distributed the faculties of mind underwent a sort of apophasis, and became the object of the worship of the civilized world. Hence it is to be confessed that "Light seems to thicken," and the crow makes wings to the rocky wood. Good things of day begin to droop and drowse. And night's black agents to their preys do pursue. But mark how beautiful an order has sprung from the dust and blood of this fierce chaos! how the World, as from a resurrection, balancing itself on the golden wings of knowledge and of hope, has regained the power of the Day of Heaven time. Listen to the music, unheard by outward ears, which is as a ceaseless and invisible wind, nourishing its everlasting course with strength and swiftness. The poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and the mythology and institutions of the Celtic conquerors of the Roman empire, outlived the darkness and the convulsions connected with their growth and victory, and blended themselves into a new fabric of manners and opinion. It is an error to imagine the ignorance of the dark ages to the Christian doctrines or the predominance of the Celtic nations. Whatever of evil their agencies may have contained sprung from the extinction of the poetical principle, connected with the progress of despotism and superstition. Men, from causes too intricate to be here discussed, had become insensible and selfish: their own will had become feeble, and yet they were its slaves, and thence the slaves of the will of others: lust, fear, avarice, cruelty and fraud, characterised a race amongst whom no one was to be found capable of creating in form, language, or institution. The moral anomalies of such a state of society are not justly to be charged upon any class of events immediately connected with them, and those events are most entitled to our approbation which could dissolve it most expeditiously. It is unfortunate for those who cannot distinguish words from

12Shakespeare, Mucheth, Ill.v.105-20.
13Shelley uses "Celtic" to refer to Germanic tribes (like those Caesar fought), not the aboriginal inhabitants of the British Isles.

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10Astra was the goddess of justice who fled Earth for Heaven since the reign of Zeus began.
thoughts, that many of these anomalies have been incorporated into our popular religion.

It was not until the eleventh century that the effects of the poetry of the Christian and Chivalric systems began to manifest themselves. The principle of equality had been discovered and applied by the French in his Republic, as the theoretical rule of the mode in which the materials of pleasure and of power produced by the common skill and labour of human beings ought to be distributed among them. The limitations of this rule were asserted by him to be determined only by the ability of each, or the utility to result to all. Plato, following the doctrines of Timaus and Pythagoras, taught also a moral and intellectual system of doctrine comprehending at once the past, the present, and the future condition of man. Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths contained in these views to mankind, and Christianity, in its abstract purity, became the exoteric expression of the esoteric doctrines of the poetry and wisdom of antiquity. The incorporation of the Celtic nations with the western population of the West inspired upon it the figure of the poet existing in their mythology and institutions. The result was a sum of the action and reaction of all the causes included in it; for it may be assumed as a maxim that no nation or religion can supersede any other without incorporating into itself some portion of that which it supersedes. The abolition of personal and domestic slavery, and the emancipation of women from a great part of the degrading restraints of antiquity were among the consequences of these events. The abolition of personal slavery is the basis of the highest political hope that it can enter into the mind of man to conceive. The freedom of women produced the poetry of sexual love. Love became a religion, the beliefs of these worship were ever present. It was as if the statues of Apollo and the Muses had been endowed with life and motion and had walked forth among their worshippers; so that earth became peopled by the inhabitants of a diviner world. The familiar appearance and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavy for; and a paradise was created as out of the wretches of Eden. And as this creation itself is poetry, so its creators were poets; and language was the instrument of their art: "Galaadot fi il libro, e chi lo scrieva."

The Provençal Trouvères, or inventors, preceded Petrarch, whose first verses are as spells, which unloosed the utmost delight which is in the enchanted fountain of the delight which is in the enchanted fountain of the delight which is in the enchanted fountain of Love. It is impossible to feel them without becoming a portion of that beauty which we contemplate: it were superfluous to explain how the gentleness and the elevation of mind connected with these sacred emotions can render men more amiable, more generous, and wise, and men more amiable, more generous, and wise, and men more amiable, more generous, and wise, and men more amiable, more generous, and wise.

Dante understood the secret things of love even more than Petrarch. His Vita Nuova is an inexhaustible fountain of poetry of sentiment and language: it is the idea of his history of that period, and those intervals of his life which were dedicated to love. His apotheosis of Beatrice in Paradise and the gradations of his own love and his own love, by which as by steps he flogged himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause, is the most glorious imagination of modern poetry. The acutes critics have justly reversed the judgment of the vulgar, and the order of the great acts of the "Divine Drama," in the measure of the admiration of the poet, which they accord to the Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. The latter is a perpetual hymn of everlasting love. Love, which found a worthy poet in Plato alone of all the antients, has been celebrated by a chorus of the greatest writers of the renewed world; and the music has penetrated the caverns of society, and its echoes still dissonance of arms and superstition. At successive intervals, Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser, Calderon, Rousseau, and the great writers of our own age, have celebrated the dominion of love, planting all the true to abound with the same mind of that sublime victory over sensuality and force. The true relation borne to each other by the sexes into which human kind is distributed has been least misconceived; and if the error which confusion of diversity with inequality of the powers of the two sexes has become partially recognized in the opinions and institutions of modern Europe, we owe this great benefit to the worship of which Chivalry was the law, and poets the prophets.

The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and antient world. The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Miltons, have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. It is a difficult question to determine how far they were conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted in their minds between their own creeds and that of the people. Dante at least appears to wish to mark the full extent of it by placing Ruphius, whom Virgil calls Justitiham urbs, in Paradise and observing a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments. And Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical proof of the system of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in Paradise. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil, implacable hate, patient cunning, and a sleepless refinement of device to inflict the extreme anguish on an enemy, these things are evil; and although venial in a slave are not to be forgiven in a tyrant, although redeemed by much that crumbles his defeat in one subdual, are marked by all that dishonours his conquest in the victor. Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has resolved to be void in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflict the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enniety, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments. Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil. And this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius. He mingled as it were the elements of human nature, as colours upon a single paillet, and arranged them into the composition of his great picture according to the laws of epic truth; that is, according to the laws of that principle by which a series of actions of the external universe and of intelligent and ethical beings is calculated to excite the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind. The Divina Commedia and Paradise Lost have conferred upon modern mythology a systematic form; and when change and time shall have added one more superstition to the mass of those which have arisen and decayed upon the earth, commentators will be learnedly employed in elucidating the religion of ancestral Europe, only not utterly forgotten because it still have been stamped with the eternity of genius.

Homer was the first, and Dante the second epic poet: that is, the second poet the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge, and sentiment, and religion, and political conditions of the age in which he lived, and of the ages which followed it, developing itself in correspondence with their development. For Lucretius had limited the wings of his swift spirit in the dregs of the sensible world; and Virgil, with a modesty which ill became his genius, had affected the fame of an imitator even whilst he created anew all that he copied; and none among the flock of mock-birds, though their notes were sweet, Apollonius Rhodius, Quintus Calaber Smyrnaeus, Nonaus, Lucan, Statius, or Claudian, have sought, in a more artificial and skilful imitation of epic truth. Milton was the third Epic Poet. For if the title of epic in its highest sense be refused to the Aeneid, still less can it be conceded to the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, the Lastsad, or the Fairy Queen.

Dante and Milton were both deeply penetrated with the antient religion of the civilized world; and its spirit exists in their poetry probably in the same proportion as its forms survived in the unformed
worship of modern Europe. The one preceded and
the other followed the Reformation at almost equal
intervals. Dante was the first religious reformer
and Luther surpassed him rather in the rudeness
and intolerance of his censures of papal usurpation. Dante was the first awakener
of entral Europe; he created a language in itself
music and persuasion out of a chaotic mass of intar-}
monious barbarisms. He was the congregator of those
great spirits who presided over the resurrection of
learning; the Lucifer of that starry flock which in
the thirteenth century shone forth from republican
Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the
bewitched world. His very words are instinct with
the spirit which is as a spark, a burning atom of inex-
tinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the
ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a light-}
ning which has yet found no conductor. All high
poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which
toained all oak's potential. Veil after veil may be
removed, the immortal nakedness of the
meaning never exposed. A great Poem is a foun-
dain for ever overflowing with the waters of
wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age
has exhausted all its divine offscourings, which their
poet's predictions and still another succeeds, and new relations are
ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and
an unexperienced delight.

The age immediately succeeding that of
Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, was character-
ized by a revival of painting, sculpture, music,
and architecture. Chaucer caught the sacred inspiri-
ation, and the superstructure of English literature
is based upon the materials of Italian invention.

But let us not be betrayed from a defence into
a critical history of Poetry and its influence on the
Society. Be it enough to have pointed out the
poets. In the large and true sense of the
effects of poets, in the large and true sense of the
touches, a number of the men of the imagina-
tion, do not as they think that their poetic

shock and terror, and the poor
away.}\n
The rich have become richer, and the poor
poorer; and the vessel of the state is
have come richer; the Scribes and Charybids of anar-
chy and despotism. Such are the effects which must
ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the
calculating faculty.

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest
sense; the definition involving a number of appar-
ent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect
of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the
pain of the inferior is frequently connected with
the pleasures of the superior portions of our
being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself are
often the chosen expressions of an approximation to
the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fak-
cion depends on this principle: tragedy delights by
affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists
in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy
which is inseparable from the sweetest melody.

The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the
pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying,
"It is better to go to the house of mourning, than
to the house of mirth." Not that this highest
species of pleasure is necessarily linked with
pain. The delight of love and friendship, the
exaltation of the ambition of nature, the joy of the
perception and still more of the creation of poetry
is often wholly unconnected with sorrow, or
government, and political oecumene, or at least, what
is wiser and better than what men now practise
and endure. But we let "I dare not wait upon
I would, like the poor cat 'tis the adage." We want
the creative faculty to imagine that which we
know; we want the generous impulse to act that
which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our
calculations have outrun conception; we have
eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of
those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the
empire of man over the external world, has,
for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally
circumscribed those of the internal world; and
man, having enslaved the elements, remains him-
self a slave. To what but a cultivation of the
mechanical arts in a degree disproportional to the
advancement of those of the true sciences, which is the basis
of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all
invention for abridging and combining labour,
to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind?

From what other cause has it arisen that the
discoveries which should have lightened, have
added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam?
Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money

Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael
Angelo had never been born, if the Hebrew poetry
had never been translated; if a revival of the study
of Greek literature had never taken place; if no
monuments of antique sculpture had been handed
down to us; and if the poetry of the republics of the
ancient world had been united together with its
belief. The human mind could never, except by
the intervention of these excitements, have been
awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences,
and that application of analytical reasoning to the
aberrations of society, which it is now attempted
to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive
and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political and historical
wisdom, than we know how to reduce into prac-
tise; we have more scientific and economical
knowledge than can be accommodated to the just
distribution of the produce which it multiplies.
The poetry in these systems of thought, is con-
cealed by the accumulation of facts and calculat-
ing processes. There is no want of knowledge
respecting what is within the reach of government,
and political oecumene, or at least, what
is wiser and better than what men now practise
and endure. But we let "I dare not wait upon
I would, like the poor cat 'tis the adage." We want
the creative faculty to imagine that which we
know; we want the generous impulse to act that
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From what other cause has it arisen that the
discoveries which should have lightened, have
added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam?
Poetry, and the principle of Self, of which money

18Eccliesiastes 7:2.
19I follow the classification adopted by the author of the
Four Ages of Poetry. But Rousseau was essentially a poet.
The others, even Voltaire, were mere reasoners. [Shelley]

10Shelley intends here the literal sense of "bearer of light."

Matthew 25:39.
is the visible incarnation, are the God and the
Mammon of the world.

The function of the poetical faculty is two-
fold; it engenders new materials of knowl-
edge, and power and pleasure; by the other it
endows in the mind a desire to reproduce
and arrange them according to a plan in rhythm and
arrangement which may be called the beautiful and the
good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be
desired than at periods when, from an excess of the
selfish and calculating principle, the accumula-
tion of the materials of external life exceed the
quantity of the power. Poetry is the accumula-
tion to the internal law of human nature. The body has then
become as it were unwieldy for that which animates it.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once
the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is
that which comprehends all science, and that to
which all science and blossom of all other sys-
tems of thought: it is that from which all spring,
and which adorns all; and that which, if
blighted, denies the fruit and the seed. It holds
and preserves the faith and the poetry of the past.
The power of poetry is rich in its combinations
and in the comprehensiveness of the poetical
faculty. This instinct and intuition of the poet
is still more observable in the plastic and pictur-
ing sense of things; it is as the colour and the
colour to the texture of the elements which compose
the rose to the surface of the sea, as the form and the
sphere of anatomy and corruption.

What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship
&c. — what were the scenery of this beautiful
Universe which we inhabit — what were our con-
solutions on this side of the grave. — and what
were not our aspirations beyond it — if poetry did
not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal
nests to which the winged faculty of calcula-
tion dare not ever soar? Poetry is not like reason-
ing, a power to be exerted according to the
determination of the will. A man cannot say, "I
will compose a poem." The greatest poet even
complaining cannot say it; for in the mind in creation is a fal-
ting coal which some invisible influence, like an
inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brilli-
ance: this power arises from within, but from
which the colour of a flower which changes and changes as;
its original purity and force, it is impossible to
predict the greatness of the results: but when
the composition begins, inspiration is already on its
threshold, and the most glorious poetry that has
ever been communicated to the world is probably
ever born. A feeble shadow of the original concep-
tion of the poet. I appeal to the greatest Poets of the presen-
t day, whether it be not an error to assert that the
finest passages of poetry are produced by labour
and study. The toil and the delay recommended
by criticism can be justly interpreted to mean no
more than a careful observation of the inspired
moments, and an artificial connexion of the
spaces between their suggestions by the intertex-
ture of conventional and expressive images: a necessity only
imposed by a limitedness of the poetical faculty
itself. For Milton conceived the Paradise Lost as
a whole before he executed it in portions. We have
his own authority also for the Muse having
"dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song,"
and let us be an answer to those who would
produce the fifty-six various readings of the first
line of the Orlando Furioso. Compositions so
produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting.
Now that instinct and intuition.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts
the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and
it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it
marries exaltation and horror, grief and pleasure;
and by its power to compose, to impose,
eternity and change; it subdues to union under its
light yoke all incorrigible things. It transmutes
all that it touches, and every form moving within
the radiance of its presence is changed by won-
drous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit
which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns
potable gold the poisonous waters which flow
from death through life; it strips the veil of
familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked
and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

What was the poet laureate? — he was poet laureate;
the crown in which the crown itself is imposed in
relation to the poet. The "mind is its own
place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a
hell of heaven." But poetry defeats the curse
which binds us to be subjected to the accident of
surrounding passion. And if it spreads its own
figure cast on its own than ever life's dark
veil from before the scene of things, it equally
creates for us a being within our being. It makes
us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar
world is a chaos. It reproduces the common
universe of which we are portions and percep-
tives, and it purges from our inward sight the film
of familiarity which obscures us from the wonder
of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive,
and to imagine that which we know. It
creates anew the universe after it has been anni-
hilated in our minds by the recurrence of impres-
sions blunted by reiteration. It justifies that
bold and true word of Tasso — "Non merita nome di
creatore uno fido." 

As a Poet, he is as the author to others of the
highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he
ought personally to be the happiest, the best,
the wisest, and the most illustrious of men. As to his
glory, let Time be challenged to declare whether
the fame of any other institution of human life
is comparable to that of a poet. That he is the wis-
est, the happiest, and the best, inasmuch as he is a poet,
is equally uncontrollable: the greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue,
the most moderate and moderate" and "the purest
thoughts," and "the purest actions." Poetry, as
could look into the interior of their lives, the most
fortunate of men: and the exceptions, as they regard those who possessed the poetical faculty in
a high yet inferior degree, will be found on con-
sideration to confirm rather than to destroy the rule.
Let us for a moment stoop to the arbitration of
popular taste, and usurping and uniting in our
own persons the incompatible characters of
accuser, witness, judge and executioner, let us
decide without trial, testimony, or form, that cer-
tain motives of those who are "there sitting where
we dare not soar" are reprehensible. Let us
assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil
was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that
Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a pec-
culator, that Raphael was a libertin, that Spenser
was a poet laureate. It is inconsistent with this
"Nobody merits the title of Creator save God and
the Poet." The line is quoted thus in Serassia's Life of Torquato
Tasso.

2Milton, Paradise Lost. 4829.
3Poet laureate may mean a man and member of this society,
unless we remember that the current laureate was Robert
Southey, a personal and political enemy of Shelley's.
division of our subject to cite living poets, but
Poetry has done ample justice to the great
names now referred to. Their errors have been
washed and found to have been dust in the bal-
ce: if their sins "were as scarlet, they are now
white as snow"; they have been washed in the
blood of the mediator and the redeemer Time.
Observe in what a ludicrous case the imputa-
tions of real or fictitious crime have been con-
fused in the contemporary calumnies against
poetry and poets; consider how little is, as it
appears — or appears, as it is; look to your own
motives, and judge not, lest ye be judged.
Poetry, as has been said in this respect differs
from logic, that it is not subject to the control of
the active powers of the mind, and that its birth
and recurrence has no necessary connection with
consciousness or will. It is presuppositional to deter-
mine that these are the necessary conditions of all
mental causation, when mental effects are experi-
enced insusceptible of being referred to them.
The frequent recurrence of the poetical power, it
is obvious to suppose, may produce in the mind
an habit of order and harmony commutative with its
own nature and with its effects upon other minds.
But in the intervals of inspiration, and they may
be frequent without being durable, a poet
becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden
reflux of the influences under which others habit-
ually live. But as he is more delicately organized
than other men, and sensible to pain and pleasure,
both his own and that of others, in a degree
unknown to them, he will avoid the one and pur-
sue the other with an ardour proportioned to this
difference. And he renders himself obnoxious to
calamity, when he neglects to observe the cir-
cumstances under which these objects of univer-
sal pursuit and flight have disguised themselves
in one another's garments.
But there is nothing necessarily evil in this
error, and thus cruelty, envy, revenge, avarice,
and the passions purely evil, have never formed
any portion of the popular imputations on the
lives of poets.
I have thought it most favourable to the cause
of truth to set down these remarks according to
the order in which they were suggested to my
mind by a consideration of the subject itself;
instead of following that of the treatise that
excited me to make them public. Thus although
avoid of the formality of a polemical reply; if the
view they contain be just, they will be found to
involve a refutation of the Four Ages of Poetry,
so far at least as regards the first division of the
subject. I can readily conjecture what should have
moved the gall of the learned and intelligent
author of that paper I confess myself like him
unwilling to be stung by the Thesmophoria of the
hoarse Codri of the day. Bavius and Marvius
undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable
persons. But it belongs to a philosophical critic
to distinguish rather than confound.
The first part of these remarks has related to
Poetry to its elements and principles; and it has
been shown, as well as the narrow limits assigned
them would permit, that what is called poetry, in
a restricted sense, has a common source with all
other forms of order and of beauty, according to
which the materials of human life are susceptible
of being arranged, and which is poetry in an un-
iversal sense.
The second part will have for its object an
application of these principles to the present state
of the cultivation of Poetry, and a defence of the
attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners
and opinion, and compel them into a subordina-
tion to the imaginative and creative faculty. For
the literature of England, an energetic develop-
ment of which has ever preceded or accompanied
a great and free development of the national
will, has arisen as it were from a new birth. In
spite of the low-thoughted envy which would
undervalue contemporary merit, our own will be
a memorable age in intellectual achievements,
and we live among such philosophers and poets
as surpass beyond comparison any who have
appeared since the last national struggle for civil
and religious liberty. The most unfailing herald,
companion, and follower of the awakening of a
great people to work a beneficial change in
opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods
there is an accumulation of the power of commu-
nicating and receiving intense and impassioned
conceptions respecting man and nature. The per-
sons in whom this power resides, may often, as
far as regards many portions of their nature, have
little apparent correspondence with that spirit of
good of which they are the ministers. But even
whilst they deny and abuse, they are yet com-
pelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon
the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to
read the compositions of the most celebrated
writers of the present day without being startled
with the electric life which burns within their
words. They measure the circumference and
sound the depths of human nature with a compre-
hesive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are
themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished
at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than
the spirit of the age. Poets are the legsions 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.

26 Codrus, Bavius, and Marvius are traditional examples
of bad poets cited by Juvenal, Horace, and Virgil.
27 The "second part" was never written.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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