PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S A DEFENCE OF POETRY: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Shelley (1792-1822) is one of the most famous poets of the Romantic period. Like Keats, he died young—drowning at sea while pleasure sailing.

2. Shelley's A Defence of Poetry was written 1821, but not published until 1840, long after Shelley’s death. Note: “Defence” is the British spelling of the American word “defense.”

II. A DEFENCE OF POETRY

A. EXPRESSIVE THEORY

1. Imagination is the central aspect of Shelley's poetics.

2. Thus Shelley opens with a common Romantic distinction between “Reason” and “Imagination” (Kaplan and Anderson 288). How does he contrast reason and imagination? (288)

3. Shelley’s definition of poetry has an EXPRESSIVE orientation: “Poetry . . . may be defined to be ‘the expression of the ___imagination___’” (288).

4. The poet’s imagination gives the poet almost superhuman powers: He is able “to apprehend the true and the beautiful” (290) and to “imagine and express the indestructible order” (290) of the universe.

5. Poetic imagination reveals “the eternal, the infinite, and the one” (290). In the poet’s mind, “time and place and number are not” (290).

6. A second EXPRESSIVE theory point is made toward the end of the essay when Shelley presents the idea that poets are possessed of a divine madness in which they become inspired prophets: A poet cannot determine to write a poem:
“A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry.’ The greatest poet even cannot say it” because when writing the poet’s mind is under “some invisible influence,” a “power” which “arises from within” (306).

6. He concludes that “the finest passages of poetry are [not] produced by labour and study” (306), but by this inspiration: “The very mind [of the poet] which directs the hands in formation [of the poem] is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the traditions, or the media of the [poetic] process” (306).

7. A final point which Shelley makes about the author is that like Longinus, Shelley contends that great poems cannot come from an evil or vicious person. Shelley writes that “the greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue” (308).

B. AFFECTIVE THEORY

1. What are the effects of poetry? Shelley uses the same answers as Horace and Sidney: Poetry both pleases and instructs; it gives pleasure and wisdom.

2. Shelley writes, “Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure; all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight” (293).

3. Later he states, “A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight” (303).

4. Shelley objects to those who speak of “the immorality of poetry” (294). For him, poetry is the best moral teacher because it enlarges the mind.

5. Contrary to social ethics, which narrow and make morality doctrinaire, “poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind” (294).

6. Poetry works indirectly by awakening people’s ability to identify and empathize: “The great secret of morals [that is, morality] is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (294).

7. Shelley says that the age in which he lived had too much science and not enough poetry: He says that “we have more scientific and economical knowledge than” people can utilize (305). What is needed is “the poetry of Life” (305), which will help people to integrate all forms of knowledge and experience.

8. The essay closes with some exultant proclamations about the moral purpose of poetry:

(1) “Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds” (306).
(2) “Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world” (307).

(3) “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (309).

C. OBJECTIVE THEORY

1. Shelley makes just a few comments on the poem as a literary object.

2. First he acknowledges the power of metaphor: A poet’s “language is vitally metaphorical” (289) since metaphor means to see the similarity in different things: Metaphor “marks the before unapprehended relations of things” (289).

3. In Shelley’s history of the drama, he points out the dangers of mingling tragic and comic elements: “The modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy, though liable to great abuse in point of practice, is undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic circle; but the comedy should be as in King Lear, universal, ideal, and sublime” (295).

D. MIMETIC THEORY

1. Like the Objective approach, the MIMETIC view also is subordinate to the Expressive and Affective aspects of the poetic process.

2. Shelley does write, “A poem is the very image [or imitation] of life expressed in its eternal truth” (292), but this mimetic statement implies that what is being imitated is, in the words of the editors, “a Platonic conception of the universe” (287).

3. Another mimetic-oriented point is made by Shelley: he does not see poets, philosophers, and even historians as being competitors or pursuing truth differently, as Plato, Aristotle, and Sidney do.

To Shelley, all great philosophers are “necessarily poets” since they present an “echo of the eternal music” (292). The same holds for “all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy,” who, Shelley asserts, “were poets” (292).

4. Similarly all great poets, such as “Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton . . . are philosophers of the very loftiest power” (292).

III. SHELLEY’S HISTORY OF POETRY

1. Almost half of Shelley’s essay examines the course of Western literature; a few of his comments on certain literary works have become famous.

2. Shelley judged Shakespeare’s King Lear “the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world” (295).
3. Shelley goes against all convention to find (almost scandalously) the rebellious Satan the hero of *Paradise Lost*: “Milton’s Devil [in *Paradise Lost*] as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture . . . ” (302).