

The Poet as Maker

Moral Didacticism and Prophetic Inspiration in Sidney and Shelley's Platonic Conceptions of the Poet

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Abstract: This paper explores the key argumentative strategies by which Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley deploy their conceptions of the poet in their prose works defending the place of poetry in English culture. Though Platonists, both Sidney and Shelley ground their accounts of poetic creativity in the Aristotelian concept of the poet as maker. However, given the different historical, philosophical, and religious contexts which separate these two great theorists of poetic practice, what the poet makes in poetic creation diverges markedly for Sidney and Shelley. My discussion centers on exploring the precise nature of the faculty of imagination in the context of Sidney's Renaissance understanding of human anthropology, and Shelley's account of imagination in relation to Enlightenment concepts of modern science and philosophical pragmatism. Both Sidney and Shelley argue for poetry as originating in a divine source of power; this results in the ironic conclusion that Shelley proposes a more religious account of the poet than Sidney's poet of Renaissance sensibility.

The clear influence of Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* upon Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* is indisputable. At the time that Shelley was composing his treatise in March of 1821, Mary Shelley was carefully reading Sidney's text, a copy of which was in Shelley's library. Lucas Verkoren has established the existence of structural parallels in the overall arguments of each text; numerous verbal echoes of Sidney's *Defence* can be heard in Shelley's *Defence*, articulating key concepts that appear to be remarkably similar. On the basis of these obvious similarities, Verkoren claims:

Though plagiarism would be too bold a word, yet it must be admitted that Shelley cannot have unconsciously borrowed from Sidney's

treitise, for the recollections of Sidney's essay are too numerous and of too striking a character. His *Defence* should have contained at least an acknowledgement of indebtedness to Sidney and it is worthy of note here that Shelley did not once record the name of his great predecessor. (69)

On these grounds, Verkoren asserts: "Sidney's *Defence* is the prototype of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*" (Verkoren 69). Perhaps Shelley remained silent on his indebtedness to Sidney because, despite the surface similarities, their poetic practices were so different. Or perhaps, Shelley so thoroughly transformed Sidney's conception of the poet that he felt mentioning his indebtedness would result in misconceptions concerning his own positions. Many of Sidney's claims for poetry become radically transformed in the context of Shelley's own poetic theory, elaborated under cultural pressures that were very different from those Sidney faced. In the course of my essay, I will address some of the key conceptual similarities in each text in order to explain Shelley's transformation of Sidney's ideas about poetry. But in order to understand the precise ways in which Shelley appropriates Sidney's account of poetry, poetic production, and poetic inspiration, for his own purposes, the key argumentative structure of each must be established.

Sidney's *Defence* is a response to Stephen Gosson's Puritanical attack on secular poetry; in *The Schoole of Abuse*, Gosson argues primarily that poets present pleasing pictures of vice, which are a dangerous temptation for the reader: "I must confesse that Poets are the whetstones of wit, notwithstanding that wit is dearely bought: where honie and gall are mixt, it will be hard to sever the one from the other" (10). Gosson argues that poetry should be used only in worshipful praise, "referring all to the glorye of God," grounding this on the claim that reason is to be used in the service of God, both in worship and in moral action: "Man is enriched with reason and knowledge: with knowledge to serve his maker and governe himselfe; with reason to distinguish good and il, and chose the best" (33). In opposition to this, Sidney finds himself arguing on two divergent fronts, for he must argue against the claim that poetry is harmful and dangerous, but he must also make the more positive argument that poetry performs a positive function in the Reformed Church, by showing that poetry, "being rightly applied, deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God" (77). In a similar manner Shelley's *Defence* is maintained against Thomas

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Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry*, in which Peacock argues that, "as the sciences of morals and of mind advance towards perfection [...] as reason gains ascendancy in them over imagination and feeling, poetry can no longer accompany them in their progress" (9). In responding to this charge, Shelley must similarly defend poetry against an ethical attack on its cultural value. But while Peacock's claim is less pointed, arguing merely that poetry is useless in an age dominated by a conception of reason that is founded in pragmatism and utilitarian accounts of human action, its force is perhaps more devastating than Gosson's more explicit moral censure. Gosson follows Plato's censure of poetry by banishing poetry from the life of the Church; in doing so, Gosson follows Plato's respect for the perverse power of poetry to move the will against the dictates of reason. In contrast to this, Peacock renders poetry obsolete, useless in the context of the Enlightenment belief in progress achieved through empirical and pragmatic advances over nature, with reason outstripping poetry on purely practical grounds. As James Bunn argues: "Peacock claimed that modern poetry was *futile*. It had no *utile*, no utility, no use. Peacock's trifling tack was all the more threatening to Shelley because his tone and his calculating style implied that poetry deserved scant attention" (97). It is an interesting point that Puritanical and Utilitarian ideas find common ground in disparaging poetry, as aesthetic reproduction is attacked on moral and pragmatic grounds, with the latter providing the greatest threat to poetic practice by marginalizing its power. It is a problem that remains with us today.

Despite the fact that the attacks of both Gosson and Peacock on the poets of their day bear heavy traces of ironic, satirical flourishes of rhetoric, both Sidney and Shelley took these respective arguments very seriously. But it is important to note that what binds these sets of texts together also sends them on markedly divergent paths of argumentation. Both Gosson and Peacock deploy their arguments against poetry on rational grounds, based upon concepts of reason that clearly present sharply contrasting standards of rational judgment, differentiated by a conception of reason as the highest faculty of the human, in accordance with Renaissance ideas of the soul, as distinguished from an Enlightenment idea of reason directed to empirical observation and pragmatic usage. Sidney writes wholly from within the context of Reformation theology and its various religious and cultural preoccupations, while Shelley clearly accepts, at least in principle, Peacock's view of Enlightenment rationality. Maintaining the historicity of these texts is vital to understanding how

the similar claims about poetic inspiration and production made by Sidney and Shelley can be seen to result in markedly divergent ideas about poetic production and its effects. Each defends his own contemporary poetic practice, or at least his own view of that practice, and not upon some abstract, universal idea of poetry, but each according to his own preoccupations and poetic practices which drive their separate arguments. Sidney defends poetry in the service of the Protestant Reformation, while Shelley defends Romantic poetry as the ideal expression of the human subject through the faculty of imagination. While the present state of scholarship notes the similarities in argumentative structure and rather striking verbal parallels linking the two defenses, the failure to take into account the divergent historical contexts in which each text is written obscures the nature of the deeper, more fundamental points of agreement which Sidney and Shelley shared, as well as the profound differences between their conceptions of poetic inspiration and creation, and poetic form, producing radically different poetic theories and radically different kinds of poets and poetic practices.

Both Sidney and Shelley defend poetry by drawing a central distinction which orders the very structure of their separate arguments. Sidney follows the classical and Renaissance rules of rhetoric rather than a logically ordered structure of argument, but begins by offering what William Temple called “an argument from differences” (145), in order to answer both of Gosson’s charges against poetry. Sidney distinguishes between the “*vates*” poet, who, in imitating the Psalms of Scripture, plays a useful role in the worship of the Christian church, and the poet as maker, derived from the Greek “word *poiein*, which is to make” (Sidney 77). Clearly grounded in an etymological derivation of terms, the distinction sets forth different forms of subject matter for each type. The religious aspect of this distinction is key; the distinction between the *vates* poet and poet as maker, or what Sidney calls the “right poet,” differentiates between religious poetry, largely poetry linked with prayers in praise of God’s glory, typically of a hymn-like quality, and secular poetry, concerned with moral didacticism and ethical inculcation. This results in two kinds of poetry: divine poetry fitted for Christian prayer and worship, and human poetry concerned with moral action. As I have argued in an essay on Sidney’s Platonism:

The *vates* poet does not imitate nature, but the God beyond nature, which establishes the difference between God and creatures

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through a divine alphabet. The *vates* does not, as does the ‘right poet’, present a picture, but a vision of God beyond sense, ‘to be seen by the eyes of the mind only cleared by faith.’ The *vates* poet marks the separation between creation and God in prayer; the ‘right poet’ presents an image of goodness that is within reach of the human. (Raiger, “Sidney’s Defense of Plato” 30)

Sidney’s poetic theory, in following both Plato and Aristotle, is mimetic, which opens up the gap in representation informing the above distinction. God can neither be imitated nor imaged; the *vates* poet is only sanctioned by imitating David’s Psalms, and in so doing, serves the Reformed Church in the production of prayers and hymns. Human action, particularly ethical action, can be represented, and is thus the business of the “right poet,” who serves the Church by “feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know poetry by” (Sidney 81–82). The rightness of the poet lies in representing moral uprightness, rather than in presenting a true, realistic picture: “For these indeed do merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach; and delight, to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger; and teach, to make then know that goodness whereunto they are moved” (Sidney 81).

The “right poet” is mimetic, not in the sense of producing accurate representations of nature, but rather in presenting images of virtue that the reader can imitate. Indeed, Sidney denies that the “right poet” can be charged with false representations, since “he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (S102). Sidney’s “right poet” who “feigns” representations of human action proposes to set forth, in “speaking Pictures,” the ideal goodness of the human soul in delightful fictions (Raiger, “Sidney’s Defense of Plato” 34). The “right poet” “goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have [...] Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (Sidney 78). As such the poet presents a picture of the Golden Age, a glimpse of human perfection, and in imitation of God, makes images according to God’s creation of goodness:

poetry give[s] right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings—with no small argument to the credulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit-maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching it. (Sidney 79)

It is in this limited sense that the “right poet” imitates God’s goodness, by presenting in poetic representation the original goodness of the human being created before the Fall. The “right poet” energizes the desire for moral goodness by presenting “moving Pictures” of that goodness, and so, aids the will to desire that which it knows abstractly. Sidney here makes a remarkable claim for poetry: the “right poet,” aided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to see and know the good, overcomes the deleterious effects of original sin, by moving the “infected will” through “moving Pictures” to desire moral goodness.

Sidney’s strategy of defining the poet according to the subject-matter of poetry, its formal aspects, and its effects upon the reader, is then developed into a lengthy series of examples from classical and Biblical literature which, rhetorically, has a cumulative effect. The structure of Shelley’s argument is similar, but rather than grounding the poet in an ethical framework that relies on an ontology presented in broad, sweeping terms (largely accepted by his Renaissance audience), Shelley presents a series of definitions which are poetic rather than argumentative. In its rhetorical structure, Shelley’s approach departs from Sidney’s strategy; as Rolf Breuer has argued, whenever in the *Defence* Shelley is confronted with the task of arguing for “the ontological status and the epistemological function of poetry, he reaches for fictional devices, above all for images, metaphors, and similes” (167–8). But in doing so, Shelley imitates Sidney in grounding his theory of poetry in an account of the subjective powers of poetic creation and the effects poetry has on readers. Of course, Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and Coleridge’s strategy of defining poetry by appeal to the creative powers of the poet in *Biographia Literaria*, are the Romantic precursors for Shelley, and in imitating Sidney’s basic approach, the poet

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of Renaissance refashioning can be seen as a key precursor to all Romantic theories of poetry and poetic creation.

The image-making faculty of the “right poet” is the imagination, a term that Sidney uses frequently throughout his *Defence* to describe the way the mind thinks through images. As such, it has a broad range of applications to all kinds of areas of learning. But for Sidney, the poetic imagination is its highest function, providing the will with incentive to act upon the abstract principles proposed by philosophy, and with patterns of meaning that will give universal significance to examples taken from history, all of which “lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illumined or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy” (Sidney 86). Here Sidney employs a conception of the image-making power of the poet which is clearly cognate with that faculty defined by Shelley as imagination; Shelley’s use of images to dramatize the way the poet employs the faculty of imagination clearly carries on this tradition, most notably in the production of images that go beyond nature and in tempering pain with the power of aesthetic pleasure to raise the soul beyond immersion in the senses. Shelley’s rhapsodic lyricism in praise of the imagination that most closely resembles Sidney’s poet in creation of a golden, not brazen world can be seen in the following passage:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds to that which is most deformed; it mingles exultation with horror, grief with pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to 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. (Shelley 137)

But whereas for Sidney, sin and death are in some sense overcome in the beautiful representation of the forms of virtue that are to be imitated by the reader; for Shelley, aesthetic form renders the tension between ideal beauty and the dross of human reality into a bearable form, sustained in the representation of that tension

in formal beauty. For Sidney, poetry sublimates the real world of human life, and in doing so, raises desire to seek to transcend nature's bounds; for Shelley, the desire for ideal beauty and its transcendent realm exists in tension with the broken forms of human existence. The difference between the two conceptions of poetry can be reduced to the different terms between which the tension of desire is drawn.

I shall return to the imagination in Sidney and Shelley's theories, in the context of a discussion of how poetry informs and orders all other modes of knowing. I will focus first upon how Shelley follows Sidney in structuring his *Defense* upon a key distinction which will allow him to present his account of the imagination in an overall discussion of the subjective powers of human nature. Whereas Sidney distinguishes between two kinds of poetry, Shelley begins by distinguishing between two primary faculties of knowing. Shelley begins his essay without introduction, going directly to an elaboration of the distinction between Reason and Imagination:

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 $\tau\acute{o}$ ποιειν, 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 $\tau\acute{o}$ λογιζειν, 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 quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and the imagination the similitude of things. Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance. (Shelley 7.4)

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Shelley's distinction between Reason and Imagination opens a space for poetry to operate as a synthetic force, bringing together what reason, in its abstract operations, breaks apart by logical analysis. Wordsworth's phrase "we murder to dissect" comes clearly to mind as a poetic statement which informs Shelley's thinking here. In linking reason to calculation and logical analysis of the relations between things, and imagination to synthetic, creative acts of cognition which are universal in nature, Shelley is clearly indebted to Kant, but follows a Cartesian account of the role of mathematics in rational thought, which will be linked with the calculus of pleasure in Benthamite utilitarianism. One can also detect Sidney's influence here, in the role imagination plays in making abstract and sterile concepts vivid and enlivening for thought. However, Shelley's Platonic materialism overturns the priority of soul over body; for Shelley, imagination is a faculty of universal cognition which intuitively values according to the work of spirit, whereas reason is allied with sense perception and the body, engaged in the quantitative analysis of parts. The sets of oppositions are striking: Imagination is the substance of human cognition, whereas reason is the shadow; Imagination is the agent of cognition, reason the instrument. Shelley has taken Coleridge's definition of the secondary Imagination as the agent of all human perception, but has fundamentally transformed it by transposing the priority of reason over sense and linking analytical reasoning with sensible particulars, wholly confined to a quantitative analysis of parts, while aligning imagination with a spiritual power that orders and informs those relations in a cognition of the whole. Shelley's Cartesian/Platonic split between two modes of mind however is conceived within material existence, since Shelley denies the existence of soul as a separable power, immortal in nature. As such, the imagination is an empirical reality and goes hand in hand with scientific discovery, with both, Shelley wants to say, empirically ordered and structured. As Harry White has argued: "[T]he distinction Shelley does make is between abstract knowledge, the result of all rational processes, and empirical knowledge, arrived at through the cooperation of the senses and the imagination" (324).

Shelley's response to Peacock's criticism of poetry as useless in the context of scientific progress and the advance of pragmatic knowledge is to assert the alliance of science and poetry as forms of imagination, an idea which Coleridge articulates in Appendix C to *The Statesman's Manual*, wherein all forms of human knowing are mediated through symbolic images, conducted by the power of imagination.

True natural philosophy is comprized [sic] in the study of the science and language of *symbols*. The power delegated to nature is all in every part: and by a symbol I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents [...] The genuine naturalist is a dramatic poet in his own line: and such as our myriad-minded Shakespear [sic] is, [...] such and by a similar process of self-transformation would the man be, compared with the Doctors of the mechanic school, who should construct his physiology on the heaven-descended, Know Thyself. (Coleridge 78–79)

However, Shelley departs from Coleridge by positing a dualistic, rather than dialectic, relationship, wholly immanent and material, and emergent from within the human subject, between imagination and reason, poetry and logic, founded upon the fundamental distinction between synthetic and analytic reasoning. As White has pointed out: “From the very first paragraph, the ‘Defence’ utterly distinguishes the activities of reason and imagination, indicating that both their processes, analytic versus synthetic, and their objects, abstractions versus sensations, are entirely different” (323). While clearly this distinction follows a Kantian form, the dualistic structure it imposes goes well beyond a Kantian set of antinomies. Shelley’s opening move, in asserting a dualism *within* human subjectivity, orders the entire structure of his *Defence*. And despite the establishment of this dualism between two modes of mental operation, Shelley baldly asserts that within the realm of human experience, imagination is the primary agent of human cognition. The precise manner in which poetry and science are operations of imagination is unclear, but as White goes on to say:

Through its capacity to synthesize experience, the imagination can establish a systematic explanation of the external world; and the analytical reason, unable to create new ideas or connect those already present in the mind, must inevitably defer to those relations built up by imaginative synthesis.... But in addition, the superiority of the imagination, defined as the ‘principle of synthesis’, over reason, the

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‘principle of analysis’, has to do with its ability to advance human knowledge by the discovery of things unknown before.” (White 326)

And in elaborating upon this idea, Shelley explicitly turns to Coleridge to articulate his idea of imagination, by appealing to the image of the Æolian harp:

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be ‘the expression of the imagination’: and poetry is cognate 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. (Shelley 109)

Shelley’s employment of Coleridge’s image of the Æolian harp is understandable, given that it derives from the early phase of Coleridge’s poetic career, and expresses a materialistic and deterministic view of human nature as a passive instrument played upon and drawn into activity by God’s immediate power. In this, the image of the passive lute is particularly well-suited for Shelley’s passive account of poetic inspiration, a point I shall return to at the end of this essay. At this point, Shelley considers the power which plays upon the lyre to be an immanent one; however the source of this principle of motion is dispersed, arising both from within human nature and also from external nature, thus indicating that the image of the Æolian lyre is limited and in need of supplementation:

But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps 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. (Shelley 109–110)

Shelley's assertion of an active principle animating human nature is introduced without argumentation and without careful systematic exposition; the image of the Æolian lyre is tenuously drawn, introduced as a hypothetical account. To say that "it is as if the lyre could accommodate itself" is to say that it is as if human nature could actualize itself in the production of beautiful forms (Shelley 109–110). If the image is applied to the distinction between reason and imagination, it is clear that Shelley's entire argument for the priority of imagination over reason is based upon hypothetical reasoning and articulated by means of an image that is never clearly determined as an active principle within human nature. Shelley's difficulty is one that all materialist philosophies of mind encounter when attempting to give a rigorous account of the ordering of cognition into a synthetic whole. This is especially true of aesthetic intuition, which is central to Shelley's concern. However, I would like to explore this issue by pursuing the more particular concern of Shelley's *Defence*: that of countering Peacock's charge that poetry is useless in a European culture dominated by utilitarian and commercial interests. I will do so by considering some of the key characteristics Shelley attributes to poetic creation.

The dualism that Shelley establishes between logic and poetry is, as we have seen, hierarchical, instantiating poetry as the architectonic form of symbolic representation which orders all the other sciences and arts. Because they "imagine and express" the "indestructible order" of things, poets are "the authors of language and of music, of 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" (Shelley 112). This is in agreement with Sidney, who claims that poetry, by inculcating virtue through delight and pleasure, gives concrete form to abstract philosophical principles, and so, actualizes all forms of knowing into an *energeia*, a willed energy, in the direction of the final end of human action, which is the attainment of virtue. Poets "do merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach; and delight, to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger; and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved—which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed" (Sidney 81). Sidney's "right poet" is foremostly characterized by the ability to produce in the reader a "purifying of wit [...] the final end [of which] is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made

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worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of” (82). Sidney summarizes his claim by establishing a hierarchy of knowledge in which self-knowledge of the divine origin of the human being, not natural knowledge, is at the pinnacle, as all learning is contained in one purpose: “to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence” (82). It is in this sense that poetry for Sidney is “architectonike,” for self-knowledge informs politics and ethics “with the end of well-doing and not of well-knowing only” (82). Sidney’s Renaissance idea of the poet however hinges upon a Platonic dialectic that becomes radically transformed in Shelley’s empirico-materialist conception of human nature. Poetry articulates laws of an “indestructible order,” and so legislates for science and art the ordering of knowledge. It is in the idea of an architectonic view of poetry as legislative in the realm of knowledge that both Sidney and Shelley ground their idea of poetry upon the Greek term *poiein*: the poet as maker.

The form of making which orders knowing, and so, leads to new discoveries in the order of the sciences, is in the production of metaphors that reveal universal classes of things. The claim that metaphor is the central trope whereby all cognition is ordered finds its origins in Aristotle. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle argues: “Metaphor is the transference of a term from one thing to another: whether from genus to species, species to genus, species to species, or by analogy” (55). Within Aristotle’s understanding of science as a series of classifications, metaphor plays a powerful role in organizing those classifications, which are built up on the recognition of patterns of differentiation and similarity in things. For Aristotle, metaphor teaches us the relations between things, and is the mark of native genius, not learned ability, for in matters of style “facility with metaphor” is the most important skill: “This alone is a sign of natural ability, and something one can never learn from another: for the successful use of metaphor entails the perception of similarities” (57). Sidney resituates Aristotle’s understanding of metaphor as cognitive into a Platonic framework of erotic desire for the Good produced in beautiful forms, claiming that “Poesy [...] is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word μίμησις [mimesis]—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight” (79–80). Sidney’s most succinct definition of poetry is cognate with Shelley’s, who argues that the language of poetry

is vitally metaphorical; that is it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through 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. (Sidney 111)

For Shelley, metaphor is the form of all cognitive thought, and like Sidney, brings life to knowledge; but while the idea follows Coleridge's account of the symbol in the *Statesman's Manual*, Shelley explicitly links the cognitive role of metaphor with Bacon's account of the way the mind perceives causes in the world, and claims that Bacon sees this as originating in "the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge" (111), an idea that Shelley probably received from Coleridge's "Treatise on Method," in which Coleridge argues that modern science is to be properly understood as a synthetic combination of Platonic dialectic and Baconian observation.¹ As such, both poetry and science are grounded in the same form of symbolic cognition, whereby the likenesses of things disparate are organized into new forms of discovery. On this basis, Shelley argues: "Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food" (118).

But while Sidney limits his conception of the "right poet" to human action, and relinquishes the field of the eternal to the *vates* poet, the prophetic poet, Shelley claims that "poetry participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one" (112). Herein Shelley unifies what Sidney had divided—secular, didactic poetry from religious, divine poetry—and affirms for poetry not merely a legislative, but also a prophetic function, which Sidney denies to the "right poets," and so departs from Plato, who "attributeth unto poesy more than myself do, namely to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit" (109), as articulated in the *Ion*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*. Shelley's Platonism, materialist as it may be, aspires to the divine

¹ See Raiger, "Coleridge's Theory of Symbol and the Distinction between Reason and Understanding: A Genealogical Recovery of the Baconian Method of Science."

and eternal in a way that Sidney's does not. Of course, Shelley's conception of eternity is immanent, bound by natural laws under which humans must operate, rather than transcendent, marking an essential difference between Sidney's Renaissance Platonism and Shelley's Romantic Platonism. For Shelley then, these immutable laws are simply the expression of cause and effect in material bodies. As such, for Shelley the poet articulates indestructible laws of nature but is also bound by those natural laws, an idea that finds its origin in Bacon's *Novum Organum*, which may in part explain Shelley's various references in the *Defence* to the poetic nature of Baconian prose. And it is within this order that Shelley argues against Peacock's criticism of poetry, for as Shelley claims: "[P]oets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists...., [in which] it is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged, that that of reason is more useful" (131). The crux of Shelley's argument against Peacock's utilitarian attack on poetry comes with Shelley's claim that poetry produces permanent pleasures, in allying itself with the expression of those eternal, immutable laws, while submitting to them, in opposition to the commercialism and pragmatism which modern science has produced in its progressive mastery of natural laws. While science attempts to understand laws of nature in order to control and harness its material forces, producing instruments to exert power over nature, the poet accepts those laws and suffers under their powerful force, which frequently runs in opposition to human desire. The tension between poetic pleasure and the crass pleasures of commercial production then establishes the central ground of Shelley's argument, and appears within the very structure of an Enlightenment view of scientific progress.

Shelley's defence of poetry then is deployed against a Benthamite view of pleasure calculated as utility; its central characteristic is discovered in the tension between pleasure and pain, both products inherent in the relationship between human subjectivity and natural objects. Poetry then imitates this tension, reproducing it in a mimetic representation of human existence, which produces a definition of "pleasure in the highest sense [...], involving a number of paradoxes" (132). Here Shelley appeals to a hierarchy within human nature, identified with the distinction between the passive and active aspects of human nature previously made by reference to in the image of the Æolian lyre:

For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with 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 fiction 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 ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry is often wholly unalloyed. (Shelley 133)

Shelley's reference to the "inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature" is only intelligible in light of Shelley's denial of original sin and his inability to grasp the nature of that defect. This marks a key departure from Sidney, whose "right poet," in recognizing the defects of sin, and the limits of nature, and "disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature" (78). While he rejects the Sidneian conception of the poet who represents a golden world that transcends human life in moral action, Shelley accepts the claim that poetry improves the human lot; in the poetic representation of the tension between suffering and joy, pain and pleasure, the poet creates "the beautiful and the good" (134), which is not achieved in a world of Platonic forms, but in the material world with all of its thwarted desires and tainted loves. This is applied to a critique of utilitarianism: "The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature" (Shelley 135).

For Shelley, it is poetry that produces an aesthetic pleasure which sublimates the suffering of pain into a higher feeling that promotes sympathy for the sufferings of

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others, thus leading to moral action. Thus, aesthetic pleasure is opposed to a utilitarian ethic which calculates pleasures on a quantitative scale of pleasure, and thereby reduces human nature to crass materialism. Rather pain must be an element of that pleasure, tempering the body's coarse enjoyments of external, sensuous, material existence. And while Shelley argues that there are experiences, representable in poetry, that express "unalloyed" joy, Shelley's own practice belies the attainment of such an ideal; the human subject is always suspended within the tension between desire for unity and its attainment, and even in such moments of attainment, the reality of lived experience in the flux of temporality gives way to the torpor of satisfaction. Shelley's aesthetic is not ascetic, but agonistic, maintaining the centrality of human suffering against the ruling ethos of Benthamite utilitarianism which values only pleasurable sensations in a quantitative calculus of human social relations.

The utility of poetry is discovered in its uselessness, its inability to produce a preponderance of pleasure over pain, which is the great desire of Enlightenment technologies in exerting their mastery over nature. Rather, poetry stands in opposition to the inhuman nature of Utilitarianism, which reduces the human being to a gross standard of mere corporeality as it exercises its sheer power over the natural world. Poetry thus maintains the value of representing what pragmatic mastery over nature seeks to eradicate: the existence of suffering in human life. The pleasure poetry affords is one of the representation of the co-existence of pleasure and pain.

For Shelley, the representation of this tension is of the greatest use to human beings: "The production and assurance of pleasure in the highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are the Poets and poetical philosophers" (133). The reference to "poetic philosophers" marks another agreement with Sidney: that Plato is a poet, who, as Sidney claims, presented philosophy under the appearance of fictional dialogues, whereby "though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and beauty depended most of poetry" (75). Shelley however finds in Plato's style the form of his poetic power: "Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, is the most intense that is possible to conceive" (114). Their Platonism is more fundamentally allied in the sense that both sublimate the desires of the body to a higher desire—the moral good for Sidney, and aesthetic pleasure for Shelley. This leads to an odd set of paradoxes. While Sidney's mimetic idea of the poet leads to the creation of a golden world, fictive in nature, liberated from the taint of

corruption and sin and representative of the ideal forms of moral action, Shelley's poet is more realistic, more mimetic of human life as experienced, thereby preserving the tensions between desire and unity, pleasure and pain, strung out on the more fundamental tension between the interiority of human subjectivity, organized by imagination, and practical action in the external order of things, ruled by the laws of nature determined by the materiality of cause and effect. But paradoxically, Shelley's poet is prophetic, a power denied to the "right poet" by Sidney. And this produces perhaps the most unanticipated of all paradoxes. For while Sidney's conception of the poet is not opposed to reason, Shelley, writing from within the context of Enlightenment rationality, argues that, while "[p]oetry is indeed something divine...at once the centre and circumference of knowledge...[and] comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred" (135), nevertheless "[p]oetry is not like reasoning, a power to be determined to be exerted according to the determination of the will" (135).

In contrast to Sidney, whose "right poet" moves the will to attempt to achieve, through self-knowledge, the ideals of human life in line with reason, Shelley claims that poetry is not rational and "differs from logic [in] that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will" (138). As Harry White puts it: "[I]nsofar as Shelley, unlike either Kant or Coleridge, does not define the imaginative aesthetic as a manifestation of reason, the resulting order is not a rational one" (323). This produces a striking tension from within Shelley's conception of poetry, which, he claims, "makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world.... Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in Man" (137). For Shelley, poetry is immutable, eternal and divine, but also irrational and illogical; in claiming for poetry a source of power that is beyond human determination, Shelley has appealed to a divine power that is nevertheless immanent in human nature. In this regard, Shelley goes beyond Sidney's conception of the "right poet," whose power, though the greatest on a human scale of human knowledge, is not from divine inspiration: "Now therein of all sciences (I speak still of human, and according to human conceit) is our poet the monarch" (Sidney 91). In accepting the challenge by Utilitarianism that poetry is useless, Shelley gives up the claims to Enlightenment rationality upon which pragmatism is based. And if science too is ordered by poetry, Shelley has unwittingly rendered the hope for delivery from crass pragmatism to a power wholly beyond

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human capacity, eternal in nature, but irrational in origin. If Sidney's golden world of moral goodness is unattainable in this life, an ideal ever postponed though continually sought, then Shelley's power of redemption which, through poetry, reclaims beauty from the realm of decay, remains outside the order of human power, its source "immutable, eternal and divine," and so beyond the command of human ordering, awaiting the breath of the divine, which goes where it will.

Shelley's aestheticism produces a most tantalizing, and agonizing, paradox: the establishment of the poetic power as divine, immanent within human nature, but wholly outside the power of human will and reason. For if, as Shelley famously claims in his last statement in the *Defence*, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" (140), then their reigning power must be acknowledged as something divine, and wholly outside their determination. For poetry "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 connexion with consciousness or will" (138), but "is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own" (136) which "acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness" (116). This is because mind does not order the material world, but is in fact the effect of material causes, thus rendering poetic creation a form of representation originating in and determined by that same material universe of things which it seeks to transcend in poetic representation. It is difficult to see how Shelley can place such trust in poetry to liberate human beings from the stress of mechanical influences and the ascendancy of "the selfish and calculating principle" (135) engendered under the ever-growing accumulation of material goods which mechanical power over nature produces, when poetry itself is bound up in those same causal relations. A wholly unanticipated implication of this is that the scientific method, if ordered by poetry, is cut off from its rational ground at its source. Science itself, with poetry as "the centre and circumference of knowledge... [and] that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred" (Shelley 135), thus finds its source, like poetry, in the realm of irrationality, outside human volition and human modes of knowing. Seen in the context of the Enlightenment epistemology which he wholly accepts, the atheist Shelley is then a more religious theorist of poetry than Sidney, whose Renaissance poetics was deployed as a defence of poetry for use in the Reformed Church.

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