

**SHELLEY. A
DEFENSE
OF POETRY**

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Shelley. A Defense of Poetry by Albert S. Cook

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ALBERT S. COOK

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A Defense of Poetry is the only entirely finished prose work Shelley left. In this we find the reverence with which he regarded his art. We discern his power of close reasoning, and the unity of his views of human nature. The language is imaginative, but not flowery; the periods have an intonation full of majesty and grace; and the harmony of the style being united to melodious thought, a music results, that swells upon the ear, and fills the mind with delight.

MRS. SHELLEY, Preface to *Essays, etc.*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

To prefer or to equal Shelley's prose to his poetry is a merely uncritical freak of judgment. His prose is, however, of excellent quality, both in his letters, which are among the most charming of their kind, and in his too few essays and miscellaneous writings.

SAINTSBURY, *Specimens of English Prose Style*, p. 342.

The mere whim, the bare idea, that poetry is a deep thing, a teaching thing, the most surely and wisely elevating of human things, is even now to the coarse public mind nearly unknown. . . . All about and around us a faith in poetry struggles to be extricated, but it is not extricated. Some day, at the touch of the true word, the whole confusion will by magic cease; the broken and shapeless notions will cohere and crystallize into a bright and true theory.

BAGEHOT, *Literary Studies*, 2, 339-341.

Nay, I doubt whether his delightful *Essays and Letters*, which deserve to be far more read than they are now, will not resist the wear and tear of time better, and finally come to stand higher, than his poetry.

ARNOLD, *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, pp. 165-6.

Shelley

A DEFENSE OF POETRY

EDITED

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

ALBERT S. COOK

PROFESSOR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
IN YALE UNIVERSITY



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TO THE MEMORY OF
EDWARD ROWLAND SILL
A DEFENDER OF POETRY

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INTRODUCTION.

I. STYLE.

SHELLEY'S prose, though by no means excessively cadenced or adorned, has yet some of the marks and qualities of poetry. It can scarcely be called poetic prose, as much of Ruskin's might not unfairly be styled; nor does it answer in all respects to the accepted notions of a poet's prose. Perhaps its characteristic has been sufficiently defined by himself in his own discussion of the 'vulgar error' that prose can never be the vehicle of an essentially poetic conception. In this discussion he does not shrink from definite statements and concrete examples (9 a-si): "Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive. . . . He forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. Cicero sought to imitate the cadence of his periods, but with little success. Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm which satisfies the sense. . . . All the authors of revolution in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, . . . but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical."

The author himself has thus enunciated two criteria which may be applied to the prose written by a poet or in a poetic mood:

1. Truth and splendor of imagery.
2. Melody or rhythm, varied,—indeterminate, and inimitable.

That Shelley's prose imagery possesses both truth and splendor there can be no question. Mrs. Shelley, surely not an incompetent critic, distinctly attributes to his language both the qualities just mentioned, and it needs no exhaustive scrutiny to determine that for these qualities his language is chiefly indebted to its figurative expressions. In the preface to her edition of his essays, she says: "Shelley commands language splendid and melodious as Plato."

The imagery of this essay always completes, if it does not effect, the revelation of its author's thought. A mind of more prosaic temper might attain equal clearness without the employment of metaphorical language, but clearness may in such cases be gained at the expense of suggestiveness. There is a creeping clearness, as there is a volant amplitude of vision, no less certain than that of the eagle when he swoops magnificently down upon his prey from the central deeps of air. It is the latter that Shelley possesses, and herein he reminds us of Shakespeare when the great dramatist is most felicitous in wedding virile thought to the clinging beauty of tropical language. In Agamemnon's speech to his auxiliar kings, Shakespeare makes him thus eloquently illustrate a heroic commonplace:—

Why then, you princes,
Do you with cheeks abashed behold our works,
And think them shames, which are indeed nought else
But the protractive trials of great Jove,
To find persistivè constancy in men?
The fineness of which metal is not found
In fortune's love; for then the bold and coward,
The wise and fool, the artist and unread,
The hard and soft, seem all affined and kin;
But, in the wind and tempest of her frown,
Distinction, with a broad and powerful fan,
Puffing at all, winnows the light away;
And what hath mass or matter by itself
Lies rich in virtue and unmingled.

Now it is no sufficient objection to the dramatist's use of figurative language to say that all this expenditure of words is but the amplification of a single short sentence, "Adversity distinguishes the hero from the poltroon." Nor is it an answer to say that such introduction of metaphor is suitable to poetry, but not to prose, else what censure must be pronounced on such an evident metaphor as this, "Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire?" We praise the aptness, as well as the beauty, of Jeremy Taylor's famous simile: "For so have I seen a lark rising from his bed of grass, soaring upwards and singing as he rises and hopes to get to heaven and climb above the clouds; but the poor bird was beaten back with the loud sighings of an eastern wind and his motion made irregular and inconstant, descending more at every breath of the tempest than it could recover by the vibration and frequent weighing of his wings, till the little creature was forced to sit down and pant and stay till the storm was over; and then it made a prosperous flight and did rise and sing as if it had learned music and motion from an angel as he passed sometimes through the air about his ministries here below. So is the prayer of a good man," etc. But if we admire the fitness of this image, there is no room left for us to condemn the not dissimilar expressions of Shelley: "The world, as from a resurrection, balancing itself on the golden wings of knowledge and of hope, has reassumed its yet unwearied flight into the heaven of 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."

But, indeed, there is no necessity of defending figurative language on the score of its services to truth, so long as we can appeal to the example of England's most philosophical politician. Burke, in his *Letter to a Noble Lord*, does not