

Harold Bloom
Editor

THE ART OF THE CRITIC



Literary Theory and Criticism
From the Greeks to the Present

Volume Six

Later Romantics

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Later Romantics

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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The Later Romantics: Shelley's Defense of the Imagination

Harold Bloom

SHELLEY'S *Defence of Poetry* is hardly considered an indisputable classic of literary theory by the assorted formalists and historicists who proliferate among us. But then Shelley's *Defence*, as Paul H. Fry observes, is thoroughly Longinian in spirit, as Shelley perhaps did not know. Yeats proclaimed the *Defence* to be "the profoundest essay on the foundations of poetry in English," a judgment echoed by Croce and by Wilson Knight. I would go further, and place it with Longinus himself as the two central discourses upon poetry in Western critical tradition. It is from Longinus and from Shelley that sensitive readers, poets and critics, have learned the precise *use of inspiration* which, as Fry says, is to reproduce itself, to create by contagion.

Shelley's *Defence* was inspired, in this Longinian sense, by his close friend Thomas Love Peacock's splendidly ambivalent attack in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820). Peacock, a superb parodist, chose Wordsworth as target, but the exuberances of parody and the comprehensiveness of Wordsworth combined so as to make poetry itself appear the object of the Peacockian scorn. *The Four Ages of Poetry* has many delights, of which its most famous paragraph is perhaps the grandest:

In the origin and perfection of poetry, all the associations of life were composed of poetical materials. With us it is decidedly the reverse. We know too that there are no Dryads in Hyde-park nor Naiads in the Regent's-canal. But barbaric manners and supernatural interventions are essential to poetry. Either in the scene, or in the time, or in both, it must be remote from our ordinary perceptions. While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age. Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruizes for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek Islands. Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has a commonplace book full of monstrosities, strings them into an epic. Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons; and Mr. Coleridge, to the valuable information acquired from similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of

German metaphysics, and favours the world with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old woman, Jeremy Taylor, and Emanuel Kant, are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound. Mr. Moore presents us with a Persian, and Mr. Campbell with a Pennsylvanian tale, both formed on the same principle as Mr. Southey's epics, by extracting from a perfunctory and desultory perusal of a collection of voyages and travels, all that useful investigation would not seek for and that common sense would reject.

One is charmed to think of the grim and pompous Wordsworth having the patience to pick up village legends from old women and sextons, particularly when one remembers how the aged leech gatherer has to repeat himself in "Resolution and Independence." Peacock anticipates the two marvelous parodies of Wordsworth's habit of listening only to himself in Lewis Carroll's "The White Knight's Song" and Edward Lear's "Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly." "Frippery and barbarism," Peacock goes on to cry aloud, rejecting the Wordsworthian project for bringing the past alive into the present. That is hardly Peacock at his best, but this is: "Poetry is the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of society." It is the presence of apothegms of such quality that provoked Shelley to the sublimity of his reply.

M. H. Abrams reads the *Defence* as a Platonic aesthetic, but I cannot agree, except that Shelley's Plato, like Montaigne's, is a skeptic. Ironically, Peacock's *Four Ages* adopts something of *The Republic's* stance toward poetry, whereas Shelley takes up the Homeric position that Plato attacked. This, to me, calls into question Abrams's contention that the *Defence* is not useful for the practical criticism of poems. Abrams asks: "For all its planetary music, has any critical essay of comparable scope and reputation ever contained less of specifically *literary* criticism?" The question is meant to be rhetorical, but is asked from a position partly historicist, partly formalist. Earl Wasserman, meeting Abrams's challenge, converted the *Defence* into historicism and formalism. Longinus and Shelley are Sublime theorists, and I myself find their essays supremely useful for a Sublime or antithetical practical criticism.

The cosmos, to Shelley as to Nietzsche after him, is the primordial poem of mankind. It is not accidental that Wallace Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* so agilely assimilates the Shelley of the *Defence* to Nietzsche as contemplating this invented world, the supreme fiction in which we dwell. Stevens's "inconceivable idea of the sun" follows Shelley's appropriation of the sun as the image of images, not so much Platonic as Shakespearean. Indeed, the sun in the *Defence* is at once a metaphor for the imagination and for poetic language as such. But this is the sun of each fresh day's creation of that particular day; it is not a Platonic sun beyond the sun. The imagination in Shelley's *Defence*, like the colors (tropes) of poetic language, is revising itself endlessly, revolving even as reality moves.

Innovation—in the heavens, in our institutions, in the new poem—is a Shelleyan synonym for imagination. The Shelleyan imagination, like the

Longinian or the Nietzschean, is agonistic in the extreme, a crucial truth that only Paul Fry among the exegetes of the *Defence* seems to have recovered. Poetry, Shelley knows, is always a response to prior poetry, a response that wavers dialectically between partial receptivity and partial opposition. Shelley, a superb critic of his own work, was telling the story of his relation to Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, but above all the vexed tale of his immensely complex relations to Wordsworth. In some instances, poets write crucial essays on their precursors, as Browning and Yeats did on Shelley. But Shelley, subtly skeptical as an intellect, partly concealed, even from himself, that his *Defence of Poetry* was also a defense against Wordsworth.

There are paragraphs in the *Defence* that can be regarded as immensely eloquent prose reductions of Wordsworth, prophetic of moments to come in John Stuart Mill and George Eliot:

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; 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 concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, 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 in 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 himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, 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 principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.

The Wordsworth of 1821 would not have endorsed the economic, social, and political radicalism of this passage, but it is pure Wordsworth of 1798. Shrewdly evading any mention of Wordsworth by name, Shelley has him in mind in the profound absolution granted to the great poets: "they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and redeemer, time." The great closing passage of the *Defence* centers itself upon Wordsworth, and to a lesser degree, Coleridge, defining both their glory and their fall into the quotidian, while also stating the credo for Shelley's life and work:

For the literature of England, an energetic development 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 communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons 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 abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the power which is seated on 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 comprehensive 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 hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Unquestionably, the poets of whom Shelley is speaking here are not himself, Byron, and Keats, but primarily Wordsworth and secondarily Coleridge. It does not matter, Shelley says, that as men Wordsworth and Coleridge have become Tories in politics, pillars of the established Church in religion, and mere time-servers in literature. "Even whilst they deny and abjure" the imagination, Wordsworth and Coleridge serve its power. Wordsworth is a hierophant or expounder of the mysterious, even though he himself cannot apprehend what he expounds. Wordsworth is a transumptive mirror of futurity, and sings Shelley on to the battle of poetry long after Wordsworth himself is uninspired. And then comes the beautifully summarizing formula: Wordsworth is the unmoved mover, as an *influence*. The famous, much misinterpreted last sentence, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," clearly needs to be interpreted in the context of the paradox that Shelley himself calls poetic "influence." The late W. H. Auden had a passionate dislike of Shelley, and once went so far as to interpret the last sentence of the *Defence of Poetry* as meaning that Shelley thought that poets were in league with the secret police. An unacknowledged legislator is simply

an unacknowledged influence, and since Shelley equates Wordsworth with the *Zeitgeist*, it is hardly an overestimate to say that Wordsworth's influence created a series of laws for a world of feeling and thinking that went beyond the domain of poetry. Very strong poet that he was, Shelley nevertheless had the wisdom and the sadness of knowing overtly what other poets since have evaded knowing, except in the involuntary patterns of their work. Wordsworth will legislate and go on legislating for your poem, no matter how you resist or evade or even unconsciously ignore him.

I do not want to end on such a tone of realistic sorrow and wisdom, even though the superbly intelligent Shelley is not ill-represented by such a tone. He knew that he could not escape the shadow of Wordsworth, and of and in that knowing he made his own poetry. I end by applying to him the last stanza of his own *Hymn of Apollo*. He would not have wanted us to think of him as the speaker of these lines, but he came as close, I think, as any poet since Wordsworth, down to our present day, to justifying our going beyond his intentions, and hearing the poet himself in this great declaration:

I am the eye with which the Universe
Beholds itself and knows itself divine;
All harmony of instrument or verse,
All prophecy, all medicine is mine,
All light of art or nature;—to my song
Victory and praise in its own right belong.

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The Art of the Critic

Friedrich Hölderlin

1770–1843

Friedrich Hölderlin was born on March 29, 1770. His father died in 1772 and his step-father died when he was nine years old, early losses that were surely significant in the psychological development of this great poet of absence. Hölderlin's mother was a provincial parson's daughter who exerted considerable influence upon her gifted son, urging him to enter the ministry.

He yielded to her desires, and attended the Lutheran theological seminary at Tübingen from 1788 to 1793. He found contemporary Protestant theology lifeless, but he made the acquaintance of the philosophers Hegel and Schelling—fellow-students with whom Hölderlin formed close intellectual and emotional ties. He also read widely and intensely, particularly in the works of Kant and Rousseau, as well as Leibnitz, Spinoza, and Plato. He often became so absorbed in these books that he feared getting “lost in the realm of abstractions.” By the time he passed his final examinations in theology in 1793, Hölderlin was certain that he would not enter the ministry; he had become more interested in the Romantic movement and in the culture of ancient Greece.

For eight years after his graduation Hölderlin devoted his energies to several projects motivated by his fervent love for ancient Greece. He worked strenuously on a translation of Pindar's odes, whose classical meter Hölderlin adapted for his own increasingly powerful lyrics. He also wrote several versions of *Hyperion*, an epistolary novel set in Greece that is now recognized as one of the greatest achievements of German Romanticism. And he began work on *Empedocles*, a Sophoclean verse tragedy. Although Goethe found his verses too “subjective,” and “overstrained,” Hölderlin was recognized as a poet, philosopher, and gifted classical scholar by most of the major Romantic figures in Germany. Hegel dedicated a long poem entitled *Eleusis* to Hölderlin, and Schiller helped him to find several of the tutorial positions by which he supported himself. In 1799 Hölderlin laid plans for a humanistic journal of poetry and criticism which was to include the work of Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, and Schiller, among others, but the project collapsed.

During this period Hölderlin fell passionately in love with Susette Gontard, the young wife of the wealthy Frankfurt banker whose children Hölderlin had been tutoring. She appears as “Diotima” in many of his poems, for which she became a central and lasting source of inspiration. He carried on a successful affair with her until his fateful trip to France in 1801.

In December of that year Hölderlin set off on foot from his mother's house to take up the post of tutor to a German burgher family living in Bordeaux. Although he left his beloved homeland reluctantly, neither Hegel, nor Fichtean philosophy, nor his radical political ties was to have a greater effect on his life than this trip. On the desolate road through rural France, Hölderlin began to believe that he was experiencing the primordial genius of southern Mediterranean culture firsthand. He felt that his studies of Greek culture were here being borne out, transmuted by some objective force into concrete reality. In a famous letter to his radical friend Casimir Ulrich Gohlendorff he wrote, "The mighty element, the fire of heaven and the silence of the people, their life in nature, their confinedness and contentment, moved me continually, and as one says of heroes, I can well say of myself, that Apollo has struck me." Fire from this vision poured into the fragmentary free-verse Hölderlin wrote soon upon his return to Germany, pushing lyric to a vatic intensity beyond anything German poetry had yet achieved.

But Hölderlin paid dearly for his direct encounter with the power or powers that he called variously "fire," the "Other," or "gods." He had always been remarkably intense and somewhat uncanny, often inspiring fear and concern in friends and acquaintances. But when he returned to Germany in June 1802, "pale as a corpse, emaciated, with hollow wild eyes, long hair and beard, and dressed like a beggar," his friends believed he had gone mad. The news that Diotima had died only aggravated his condition, and he spent the fall in the care of a local physician. For the next three years Hölderlin struggled with headaches, severe depression, and disorientation even as he wrote some of his greatest lyrics, including "Patmos," "Nightsongs," and several hymns.

In 1805 Hölderlin was implicated in an assassination plotted by a radical circle with which he had associated, but when the authorities questioned him he responded incoherently in a private language composed of a mixture of Greek, Latin, and German. He was judged mentally incompetent to stand trial, and placed under strict observation in a psychiatric clinic in Tübingen. In 1807 he was released into the care of a local carpenter who admired *Hyperion*; he lived alone in a tower in Tübingen for the next 40 years of his life—meditating, playing the flute, occasionally receiving friends, but writing little poetry. He died on June 7, 1843.

Hölderlin was a poetic genius so pure, so rhapsodic, as to question the limits of coherence. Richard Sieburth suggests that his life and work are best understood in terms of a dialogue with "otherness"—with an absent presence whose dialectical evasions could only be expressed lyrically. A distinguished Freudian critic, Jean La Planche, interprets Hölderlin's poetry more positively in relation to the psychic dilemma of the search for an absent father. According to La Planche, Hölderlin's personal search for

figures of intellectual and spiritual authority (e.g., Hegel and Schiller) is echoed in the great religious longing of his poems. The fundamentally ambivalent nature of this search is dramatized by Hölderlin's elusive language, which finds itself only at the point where it slides over into silence, the realm where once again the poet has no authority whatsoever. Both in his central preoccupation with absence, and in his formal and metrical elaborations on the abyss, Hölderlin anticipates many of the major concerns of modern poetry, philosophy, and criticism. Wallace Stevens described modern poetry as "the poem, of the act of the mind / In the act of finding what will suffice," a poetry in which "exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns." Hölderlin's essay "On the Processes of the Poetic Mind" stands as a singularly profound meditation upon the sufficiency of the poetic act of the mind.

ON THE PROCESS OF THE POETIC MIND

If the poet has once mastered the mind; if he has felt and assimilated the common soul that is shared by all and is individual to everyone, has held it fast, has assured himself of it; if, further, he is certain of the free movement, of the harmonic interchange and advance in which the mind is inclined to reproduce itself in itself and in others; if he is certain of the fine progress prescribed in the ideal of the mind and of its poetic way of inference; if he has realized that a necessary conflict arises between the most primary demand of the mind, which aims at communality and some simultaneity of all parts, and between the other demand, which commands it to move outside of itself and to render itself in itself and in others in fine progress and interchange, if this conflict always holds him fast and draws him onward along the way towards fulfillment; if, further, he has realized that just that communality and relatedness of all parts, those mental contents, would not be tangible, if they were not different from the sensual contents, according to degree, even discounting the harmonic interchange, even with the similarity of the mental form (of simultaneity and association); further, that that harmonic interchange, that advance would, in turn, not be tangible but an empty, easy shadow play, if the interchanging parts, even with the difference in the sensual contents, do not remain the same in sensual form during the interchange and advance of the mind; if he has realized that that conflict between intellectual content (between the relatedness of all parts) and intellectual form (the interchange of all parts), between the pausing and the advance of the mind is solved by the form of the subject matter in all parts remaining identical in the very advance of the mind, in the interchange of intellectual form, and that it replaces just as much as must be lost of the original relatedness and unity of the parts in the harmonic interchange; that it constitutes objective contents in contrast to intellectual form and gives the latter its full significance; that, on the other hand, the material interchange of the subject matter, which accompanies what is eternal in the intellectual contents, the multiplicity of the same might satisfy the demands of the mind that it makes in its progress and that are retarded through the demands for unity and eternity in every moment; that precisely this material interchange constitutes the objective form, the shape, in contrast to the intellectual contents; if he has realized that, on the other hand, the conflict between the material interchange and the material identity is resolved by the loss of material identity, of passionate progress, wary of interruption, replaced by constantly resounding, all-equalizing intellectual content, and the loss of material multiplicity that comes about due to more rapid advance toward its goal and impression due to this material identity is replaced by constantly interchanging, ideal, intellectual mental form; if he has