Shelley on the Nature of Poetry*

VI. POETRY AND HISTORY

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 detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according 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 partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the 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, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it. A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; 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 may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy, were poets; and although the plan of these writers, especially that of Livy, restrained them from developing this faculty in its highest degree, they made copious and ample amends for their subjection, by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images.

The work of the poet, according to Shelley, achieves absolute and perfect universality, while that of the historian either enjoys no universality whatever, or perhaps only attains it where "the interstices of his subjects" are filled with "living images." Although, to us, it would appear difficult to think clearly about the distinction between poetry and history without having determined what sort of universality the work of art may be said to attain and, consequently, without distinguishing poetic universality from scientific, these aspects of the matter give Shelley no trouble because he nowhere clearly separates the speculative order, to which science belongs, from the practical, but is content merely to identify science in a vague way with the activities of "reasoners and mechanists." Our own understanding of the distinction between science and art, to be explained in chapter X, forbids us to accept his claim that a poem can be an example of the truest kind of universality, but we readily agree that it is always a more universal thing than a piece of history, and has therefore far more power over the human mind. This is substantially the doctrine of Aristotle, of course, and in spite of the difficulties occasioned by refusing to history even the limited universality of art, there seems to us no better answer to the question of their inter-relation.

* The first part of this article has already appeared in the *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol.IV, n.1.

Let us see now if we can establish with some exactness the special kind of universality which the poet is able to attain.

> ...The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened but a kind of thing that might happen, i. e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between the historian and the poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse — you might put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.[1]

Aristotle's remark that "poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history," was translated by Wordsworth, who apparently had not himself read the *Poetics*, into the claim that "Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing," and this typically Romantic exaggeration is perpetuated when Shelley declares that "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth." But Aristotle, as usual, must be taken as meaning precisely what he says, and he here offers no grounds for supposing that, because poetry is superior to history in universality, it therefore reaches the highest universality possible. As a matter of fact, he carefully refrains from calling the expressions of the artist simply universals, observing only that they are "of the nature of universals." If examples of true universals be sought for, examples, that is, of statements completely intelligible and always and everywhere true, these will be found only in science. No work of art can be universal in the sense which is true of scientific propositions; no poem can ever be resolved into its component parts like a mathematical equation, nor made the subject of rigid inference like a philosophical thesis.

Indeed, to admit, as Shelley does, that a poem is an image, is implicitly to deny to it the possibility of "eternal truth." The Othello of Shakespeare does not of course represent a certain historical individual who had the misfortune of allowing jealousy to lead him to the murder of an innocent wife; rather he represents a typical man, beset by typical problems and temptations, and becomes the medium for a kind of general significance; so that the tragedy is in no sense a record of particular facts, but a kind of general statement. Yet there is a vast difference between this sort of universal statement and those of science, a difference which may be understood simply by recalling certain attributes of the image. The scientific statement, — we may think of an algebraic formula as the clearest kind of example — is merely a sensible sign, related to a given truth in virtue of convention. But the image proceeds from, and is dependent upon its original; no convention determines its meaning, nor could any other image carry precisely the same meaning. Furthermore, the poetic image is valued for itself alone, as the singular thing that it is, and gains as much of its force from being singular as from being universal; it is because Othello

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1 ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, chap.9, 1451a36.

is convincing and real that he moves us, not merely because he has a lesson to teach. The work of art is a unique sort of thing, both as to what it expresses and as to its mode of expression; it is a kind of concrete abstraction; a special type of universal which can be intuitively seized by reason of its singular form, — whereas the conception of science is a universal without qualification which has been assigned a particular symbol only as a necessary and incidental means to its communication. Needless to say, this insistence on the superior universality of science must never lead us to infer that a poem will be more perfect in proportion as it approaches the standards of scientific expression. These two distinct kinds of universality, of science and of poetry, lie in quite opposite directions, so to speak, and represent contrary movements of the mind: the one, tending to abandon the singular and to move by abstraction towards the pure universal; the other, tending to descend from the universal to the singular while retaining the universal. All art is excellent in proportion as it reaches this paradoxical goal, a singular which is yet a universal; and a great work of art owes its beauty and strength as much to its singularity as to its universality. To be convinced of this, we need only attend to the special kind of singularity which the poem or statue enjoys, a singularity distinct from that of the object of nature and of a higher order. The statue of Pegasus is not subject to the same regard we bestow upon a horse at the race-track. The statue is not this figure in stone, over which we may run our eyes or fingers, and which is present to an uncomprehending child as it is to us; rather it is the image, the dynamic form expressive of what ought to be, rendered singular by a sensible form but not in itself sensible, inaccessible therefore to empirical investigation and, while retaining much of the compulsion of a natural object, possessed of the immense advantage of being far more representative. Othello is preferable to any historical personage, not merely as being a universal, but also as being from our viewpoint a better singular.

Since its images are like symbols which can be understood but not translated, that is, which utter a meaning expressible in this single form and no other, poetry cannot help being less universal than science. History enjoys still less universality than poetry. What is the nature of history, then? Is it a kind of feeble art? Or perhaps neither art nor science? To this difficult and controversial question we believe the only intelligible solution to be that of Aristotle, which is here satisfactorily stated by Shelley. History, according to the poet, is neither art nor science; and he might almost be thought to be translating the definition of St. Thomas, *narratio singularium*, when he calls it "a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect."

This drastic limitation of the scope of the historian and this judgement upon the value of his work are not likely to be accepted unless the nature and conditions of his task are fully appreciated. Both scientist and poet enjoy a more advantageous position than the writer of history. Both are in pursuit of an order: the former, of the order of things as they are; the latter, of the order of things as they ought to be. The historian is

forbidden any ideal comparable to these, because the charge that is put upon him is to remain loyal to the world of fact, and the order governing that world is forever inaccessible to reason. To embrace the Design which would explain the confusion and multiplicity of history is quite impossible for man. Even if the initial obstacle of inadequate information could be overcome; even if his knowledge of past events were complete to the last detail, and he were capable of assimilating and retaining the unimaginable mass of evidence implied in such knowledge, man could not possibly enjoy the vision of the Reason which lies behind all these events and is their ultimate explanation. The chief cause of the historian's helplessness before the sequence of facts might seem at first to be the interference of free-will, fortune and chance, which renders so many of them unpredictable. But even if we imagine a world from which these allies and abettors of the irrational were banished, his plight would not be much improved. Granted all events did occur by rigid necessity, there would still be no assurance that a thinker could lay bare the governing principles of history from the study of a past which, at best, could never be more than a section, and an indeterminable section, of total history. The possibility of reliable inference from only a part of the sequence could imply nothing less than this: that the whole train of human events formed a series of the mathematical type, as in calculus, where the knowledge of a few consecutive elements permits the prediction of all the rest. But of course the fact is that, in the world as we know it, necessity, and even decent probability, are far from accounting for all the events, or even for the most important events, in the course of human affairs. From the rise and fall of empires to the little joys and sorrows of domestic life, there is no incident in human existence that may not turn helplessly on some tiny breath of chance. It is by chance a man comes into the world; by chance he is born into a given climate, race and class; by chance his life will often be guided, and upon a chance the end of it may hang. It is not without justification that he sometimes is led to curse the Unreason, rather than the Reason, which seems to have set his course.

> Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
> And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . .
> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Now, it is this condition of things, this state of turmoil, maintained in the world by the forces of contingency, which determines for the mind the attitude it may assume. Only two choices are possible: either reason will take up these unintelligible facts as materials, to be deliberately recast into the order which reason seems to require; or, like a doctor baffled by some strange malady, the mind will resign itself to reporting what is happening with all possible accuracy and detachment. The first choice will result in poetry; the second will produce that "catalogue of detached facts" which is history as we understand it.

This fundamental obligation to respect the actual fact explains all the distinguishing attributes of history. Like science, history must have

a humble regard for reality, with this difference, of course, that science will confine itself to the study of a kind of fact for which some explanation, even if no more than a tentative one, can be found; whereas history must aim at reaching all the facts. The historian, therefore, is bound by the same strict rules of investigation as the scientist. He must utilise all available sources; comparing and criticising them; judging them, as he himself will be judged, when they are guilty of omission or distortion. But the task of suggesting causes or of drawing practical conclusions is not his; he has nothing to teach for the simple reason that there is nothing to be taught in a sphere where no order nor universality can be perceived. Authentic history cannot escape an irrationality like that of life itself. Moreover, the duty of reaching all the facts is of course an impossible one, for the singular is inexhaustible. Let the historian set himself time-limits as narrow as the modern novel dealing with the stream of consciousness and he will still find himself obliged to practise selection and to resign himself at last to delivering an account that will be only "partial." The tyranny of the fact thus imposes upon history two essential conditions, unintelligibility and incompleteness.

These are hard words, of course, and so uncompromising a relegation of the historian to the function of mere chronicler will not be received with much applause nowadays, when an entirely different attitude, inherited from German idealism, has become traditional. But the contrast we shall now attempt to draw, with Shelley's help, between the work of the poet and that of the historian, should demonstrate that the more appealing solution, which would allow the historian a share in the privileges of the artist, is beset with difficulties much greater than those confronting the Aristotelian view, when that view is correctly understood.

The thinker, condemned to live and move and have his being in a world where everything he values may become the prey of accident and unreason, must seek for escape; and, if this cannot be achieved in fact, will at least attempt it in thought. In this way the constructions of art are born. From materials which may be the very facts of history, an image of human life is built according to the maker's notion of what should be, the work being governed by the sole necessity of achieving an intelligible and convincing result. The re-moulded universe of the poetic imagination cannot avoid the apparent formlessness of the actual universe unless unified by some dominant principles or ideals which will make it possible for all the actions and events of this new world to take on direction and purpose. Nor will the poet's solution seem of any worth to his fellow-man unless the principles which he adopts are generally acceptable as conforming to the permanent requirements of our human nature. In a real sense, therefore, the good poem is no mere fiction but has actual truth; but its truth is truth to human nature, not truth to fact. In the drama men and women act and suffer according to what the human mind deems to be probable, not according to actual probability; the laws which are laid bare, the universality which is achieved by the artist, are not objective; his solution is not of a real problem, nor can it ever alter the fate of the historian,

to whom illogical fact dictates what shall be recorded. In art, the universality which history cannot discover in life is artificially generated by "the creation of actions according 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 irreconcilable difference between the world of fact and that of poetry may be made clearer by considering what new and curious laws of being arise as soon as we pass from the former to the latter. The mirror held up to nature by the artist is a magic one which "makes beautiful that which is distorted"; and the metaphor here is more effective than might appear at first glance, for one secret of the power of poetry lies precisely in this, that it is no unbelievable fairyland or impossible utopia that we see reflected in it, but the actual world of daily life, although transformed with such subtle skill as perhaps to lead us to overlook the vast difference between the lovely reflection and the reality. The best way to emphasize this difference is perhaps merely to note that, from the poetic world, chance and fortune in the true sense have been completely banished, so that nothing is permitted to happen except "what is possible as being probable or necessary," while even this possibility is of a peculiar kind and not at all that which is discerned in history. That there is no place for genuine chance in good art is too obvious a proposition to require much comment. In the drama it is not by accident that handkerchiefs are lost and letters miscarry; it is by deliberate design of the author, through whom mishaps of this kind come to have a purpose and function in the growth of the story. The kind of utterly meaningless chance which drives us to the theatre for relief must never be allowed to pursue us there, and the very nearest the poet dare approach to it is when he makes some event occur by chance simply because it is probable or likely that by this time, or in these circumstances, something of the sort would happen. It is clear, therefore, that actual possibility, that of history, is not the possibility which the poet must respect; according to that possibility too many things happen which make no sense whatever, while the poet must seek out only those which have that kind of probability which will render them acceptable to the mind.

So far, poetic possibility appears to be much narrower than actual possibility, and it may surprise us to learn that in another respect it is really much wider. What is possible for the historian, we have seen, may be impossible for the poet. But the reverse is also true: what is downright impossible for the historian may be quite possible for the poet. It does not matter how much history may protest the unlikelihood of such or such a train of events; the artist may use them, no matter how unprecedented or marvellous, so long as he is able to make them convincing. "For the purpose of poetry, a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility."[1] So that, when we condemn a work of art for its lack of "probability," the probability to which we are referring need not be that of real life, since we are not always in a position to be sure whether that

[1] ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1461b9.

probability has been violated or not; rather the work is found unsatisfying because it has failed to respect the judgement of the human mind as to what is proper and fitting. That is the kind of possibility we demand in art, nor do we care that it is not always discoverable in life, — "if men such as Zeuxis depicted be impossible, the answer is that it is better they should be like that, as the artist ought to improve on his model."[1]

The acknowledgment of these irreconcilable differences which separate art from history should not, of course, lead to the false extreme of insisting that the poetic has nothing whatever to do with the real, — that would be simply to deny that a poem is an image having some aspect of human life for its original. But it should also be manifest that to disregard these principles of distinction is to invite the worse and more dangerous absurdity of confusing poetry with history. To fall into this last error is to identify the universe of the imagination with the actual one in which we live, by crediting the poet's expressions with the truth of fact; or it is to permit the historian to poeticise his facts and thereby to destroy history by making it fiction. Even if a poet in his work happens to have observed precisely the course of historical events, to read him for the sake of the history is to read him stupidly. No historical poet has any wish to convince us that such or such a person actually lived and actually did these things, but rather that he might well have existed and might well have so acted; the poet employs history only in order that we may attend more readily to the poetry, the reason being, as Aristotle remarks, that what is known to have actually taken place is convincing and can therefore enhance poetic possibility.[2] On the other hand, there can surely be no thanks due to the writer of history who persuades us that certain events came about in orderly sequence and by reason of these adequate causes and motives, when in fact they did nothing of the kind. When composed by the agents of totalitarian states, this sort of history is easily called by its true name; when produced by a mind of more rational outlook and broader sympathies, it may no longer deserve to be termed outright falsehood, but still requires to be distinguished from history pure and simple.

The great objection to the view of history advanced above is of course that history so defined has never, and can never, be written. It has already been conceded that anything like a complete record of the facts is impossible of attainment; judgement and selection must be practised by the historian, and these imply the exercise of prudence, and of ethical and political science. There would seem no point in demanding that the historian set down the reality itself; he cannot manage that and, even if he could, would produce something quite unprofitable. Surely his function is to interpret, not merely to recount; to throw some light on past events, not to leave them in obscurity and confusion.

The human mind is in a difficult quandary here and must be wary of a natural temptation to take a way out which will gratify its desire for

[1] ARISTOTLE, *op. cit.*, 1461b10.

[2] *Ibid.*, 1451b15.

truth at the expense of the truth. It is essential to realise that the very reason why historical events simply demand that judgement of some sort be passed upon them is in part because they offer in themselves no true basis for such a judgement. This may be made clear by comparing a historical account with the statement of a mathematical theorem, for example: in the latter case the mind will feel no urge to approve or condemn, because the order presented to it is so manifest and unalterable as to render absurd any attitude but simple acceptance; but the tale of a war, a revolution, or an electoral campaign must awaken our moral and political judgement, unless it is simply too uninteresting to be read. Events of this kind, besides being of far more concern to human life than phenomena of chemistry or astronomy, arouse the mind to action by their very intractability; the more unintelligible the fact, the more urgent the protest from intelligence; the more contingent and variable the sequence of events, the keener the pursuit of the hidden laws which must govern them. And yet, in every case where there is not sufficient evidence to found at least a respectable scientific hypothesis, the condition impelling us to pass judgement is precisely that which must oblige us to refrain from judgement or, at the very least, to refrain from falling into the delusion of supposing that the way things should be is the way they are. We cannot think of actual events without thinking them into some sort of order; but if we think at all, we will never identify the order conferred by us on these events with that ultimate order of theirs which must remain beyond the reach of mortal sight. To distinguish the formal nature of history is the object of this discussion and, while it may be true that a book of history will often be valued by reason of the excellence of the ethical and political science and prudential discrimination which it reveals, it is no more possible to define history as a blend of these other disciplines than it is to identify history with poetry. A man may make use of facts in order to construct a better tale than was ever told by history; a man may reason and speculate as to the laws and forces behind the facts, in so far as the facts will allow him to do so; in neither case does he produce history. If history is to have any identity, it can only be by the possession of an object of its own, and that object is simply the singular fact in itself, however unacceptable or hostile it may appear to the poetic or scientific mind.

Nor need we feel disconcerted because the objective set for the historian is an impossible one. Both scientist and poet also pursue goals never to be perfectly realised: the first, the knowledge of natures in greater and greater particularity; the second, the perfect fusion of universal and singular, and of sensuous and intelligible, in the image. Perhaps it is because these last two always win so obvious, if only partial, a victory over the unintelligible, whereas the historian must submit to it, that we have less trouble in identifying them.

A simple example may serve to introduce our final conclusion. When five or six witnesses are called up in court of law to describe what they saw of a street-corner accident, it is obvious that their accounts can never be in agreement down to the last detail. It is also obvious that the duty of

judge and jury is to attempt to reconstruct, from these varying narratives, a picture of what actually happened. Should these officers of the law prefer one story to another because of its superior expressiveness or more rational order, they will no longer be considering them as histories and will be abandoning the only basis for a just judgement, which is the truth of fact. We find ourselves in a similar relationship with history. The writer of history cannot fail to color the facts he is handling, by casting them into an order partly of his own choosing, or by interpreting them according to his own standards; but, if we are to determine the value of his work *as history*, these aspects of it must be ignored. The statement of the scientist we esteem because it is dictated by a manifest order in things with which neither he nor his reader have had anything to do; the design of the poet we also accept because it is pointless to object to an order admittedly independent of fact and composed to suit the desires of the mind; the account of the historian, finally, we accept, and must accept, because it corresponds with what actually happened, — whenever it fails to tell what actually happened, it may not lose all value, but it has lost the value of history. We may agree with Shelley, therefore, that "A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful," since actual events do indeed proceed according to a Design than which nothing would seem more beautiful, were we capable of apprehending it, while recorded facts will not be less historical for lack of design. And it may be possible to add in the same sentence that "poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted," since the disorder and confusion of events as we see them is conquered by the poetic image. But we cannot join him in the opinion that "just history" is truer than that of the epitome by reason of the poetry which it contains, nor in the praise which he bestows upon the great historians when they bridge the gaps in an intelligible series of events by the insertion of persuasive fictions.

VII. ART AND MORALITY: BENEFICENT INFLUENCE OF POETRY

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 auditors are fully aware of the excellency 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 splendor of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers; it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of 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 auditors 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 civilization has reposed. Homer embodied 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 unveiled to their 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 they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they are by no means to be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch, under names more or less specious, has deified its peculiar 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 temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armor or modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature can not be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendor; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life; nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists. The great secret of morals 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. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. 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. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise 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 a glory in the participation of 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 diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which 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 expressions 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 has erased 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 rendered subject to the will of man, or that 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, and 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 inquiry 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 conjunction of events; poetry is ever found to co-exist with whatever 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.

In these passages Shelley for the first time takes up the difficult problem of the relation of poetry to morals. His exposition is rather disorderly and uncertain: after insisting on the immense power for good which poetry can exert over human conduct, he is obliged to face the difficulty that art, even of the highest order, can fall decidedly short of an acceptable morality; to which problem he quickly finds two solutions. These answers seem unsatisfying even to their author, for, after the splendid paragraphs on the drama, to which our next chapter is devoted, and which, though digressive, hold implicit in their magnificent phrases all the principles necessary to a true solution, he attacks the principal difficulty again, this time with more honesty and penetration, if still without complete success. In these ethical matters, we may expect to find our poet's judgements distorted by his reading of the philosophers of the Revolution, although his sense of the true nature and direction of his art is still able to act at times and results in statements as illuminating as any found elsewhere in his work.

The unaccountable effectiveness of poetry upon human conduct, its unobtrusive hold over the minds and hearts of men, is the first subject of consideration, and the secrets of this influence are brilliantly suggested. The poet always causes pleasure, and it is indispensable that he should do so. Yet he is no mere purveyor of sweetmeats; mingled with the delight he offers is true wisdom, which ensures that his influence upon society will be profound and stable, and this wisdom, unlike that of the moralist, will always find the doorway of man's spirit open because of the delightful fashion in which it is presented. Nor is this to be taken to mean that the pleasure of poetry acts merely as a lure and inducement: "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation."[1] The pleasure in artistic imitation is no superficial thing; it is like the taste in food, a natural concomitant and the sign of the naturalness and necessity of that in which it is found. The popular mind, nourishing itself upon poetry, will be as unaware of the strength so acquired as is the case with the individual in normal digestion and, particularly in "the infancy of society," may never give the poet due credit for the stimulus and enlightenment it has received. There is no great difficulty, then, in

[1] ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448b5.

finding sober philosophical meaning in the ardent claim that "it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness." The good influence which poetry brings is not deserved by any effort of ours but enters in so naturally as to seem a heavenly inspiration; the mind being, either unconscious of what is happening, or reluctant to attribute an influence so mysterious and irresistible to a cause with which it is familiar. Opposition or criticism are disarmed by the additional fact that the poet seems quite without design on his audience; he is no eager propagandist or self-interested rhetorician. That lovely voice, like the nightingale's, issues from the depths of an impersonal obscurity, appearing to utter simple truth and beauty rather than to be attempting to move or persuade. This self-effacement is necessary for the artist because, as will be explained later, he is essentially a maker and neither a doer, nor primarily even a teacher; his aim is to fashion a beautiful object, and his first devotion is to the good of his work. His productions draw their peculiar effectiveness from this, that, as things made, they stand by themselves and seem to speak for themselves, relying no more on the authority or persuasive skill of their originator than do the statements of pure science, yet with none of the dry inadequacy of the latter. Shelley's comparing of the poet to the nightingale also reminds us of the naturalness and inevitability of the mental processes and mode of expression which culminate in this kind of utterance. Poetic speech invites contradiction as little as the song of a bird or any other music of nature, its inevitability leaving no room for correction or improvement. True, the voices of nature never carry the intelligible meaning offered by the human artist; but, even though his message may be partly translatable into propositions susceptible of critical discussion, who will feel inclined to treat it in this fashion?

For these reasons, it is easy to admit that the genius of a poet like Homer must have contributed greatly to the building of the social system of ancient Greece; although the analysis here offered of the manner in which such work can actually bring about the moral improvement of society is not nearly so satisfactory as that found in the discussion of the power of tragedy which is to come a little later.

No sooner has Shelley praised the moral elevation of the great Greek epics, than he recalls that it is far from being consistently sustained, seeing that some of the famous heroic figures of these works are scarcely authentic exemplars of virtue, and he is now led to a first attempt to explain how true poetry may sometimes appear to be in conflict with morals. This first solution seems influenced more by a passionate desire to protect the purity and spirituality of his art than by honest thinking. The great poet, he insists, knows very well how crude and deficient are the moral notions of his age, but deliberately allows his personages to assume them, as a "temporary dress" which will cover without concealing their true grandeur of soul; or it may well be, he goes on to say, that unless subdued by some such earthly garb, the beauty and splendor of a great artist's conceptions would prove too dazzling for mortal sight. The implication is that the poet is in conscious possession of a moral code far more elevated than that of the

vulgar, so that, if he thought his hearers capable of it, he might reveal to them eternal truth in all its splendor. To so emphasize the role of the ideal in poetry is certainly understandable, since the poet is of all men the least willing to leave the world as he finds it; but what Shelley seems to overlook is that the poet's function as poet is precisely to "temper this planetary music to mortal ears," to bring an ideal perfection within sight and touch of men. For an artist, then, expression of the eternal in the language of time and place is no matter of conscious choice; it is spontaneous and essential to his work. It is no compliment to the poet as artist to attribute to him the power of conceiving an ideal more sublime than that which he has expressed; in this respect the moral philosopher may easily surpass him and, of the two, it is also rather the latter who exhibits his conception in all "its naked truth" — thereby leaving us bored and discouraged. Mere ideals, in short, offered in their abstract purity, are never poetry; nor has the artist either the means or intention of dealing with these or any other principles directly, his business being rather to imitate them so as to give them sensible and convincing form by expression in terms of human experience. It is absurd to think of the Homeric figures as wearing their vices like a superficial costume hiding a deeper beauty within: the camouflage and disunity in the poetic image implied by such a notion constitute a denial of its very nature. Moral defects inserted into a dramatic portrait are necessary if it is to be effective, and are as much a part of the integral unity as the virtues; far from being "an accidental vesture" hiding the "beauty of the internal nature," they are the very means of its artistic expression. That the attitude of the drama towards the vices and follies of men should vary from age to age is only further proof of the poet's obligation to express himself in terms of the world which he and his hearers know. Shelley is perfectly right in suggesting that such dramatic representations, in spite of their obvious moral defects, seem to suggest a perfection which they do not state and can inspire the spectator to desire something still higher; but this is simply in virtue of their power as images, not because of some absolute perfection actually lying concealed within them which the poet could have fully exposed had he wished.

As if himself dissatisfied with the explanation he has just given, the poet, at the beginning of his next paragraph, turns to a new solution, based this time on the special mode in which poetry produces its moral effects. Passing over the assertion that "ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created," we may note with approval the marked difference which Shelley finds in the manner and efficacy of their operation. Ethics, making its appeal directly to reason and experience, instructs and admonishes, but does little to create a good disposition in men. Poetry acts in "another and a diviner manner," a manner the more effective because indirect and difficult to observe, and in virtue of which, Shelley is convinced, a work of art can somehow or other do good even when its subject is morally reprehensible. That this conviction has a basis in true principles we shall attempt to show later; but the poet's own earnest attempts at justifying it are clearly unsatisfactory and we are obliged to consider the present one even weaker than the first.

To understand what he is propounding here, it must be recalled that his reading of Godwin and other revolutionary philosophers had led him to an ethical theory resting on the belief that the innate benevolence of man was such that no person conscious of the misery of others could possibly be unwilling to relieve it. If anyone is hard and selfish, it can only be because, being uninstructed and deficient in power of apprehension, he is simply unaware of the pain and injustice he is causing; he lacks that power of imagination which would enable him to feel and share the sorrow of others. "The only distinction between the selfish man and the virtuous man," Shelley declares elsewhere, "is, that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, whilst that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference. . . .Selfishness is the offspring of ignorance and mistake."[1] Hence, to bring about the conversion of the wicked, what is required is not the imparting of moral principles nor the exposing of the unreasonableness of the offender's conduct, but simply the stimulation and development in him of his power of imagination, which is "the great instrument of moral good." So it is the poet, more than anyone else, who can really work a cure; "poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb," and it follows that "disinterested benevolence is the product of a cultivated imagination, and has an intimate connection with all the arts . . ."[2]

The warm-hearted unrealism of this doctrine, so characteristic of Shelley, invites sympathy, if it cannot deserve much consideration from intelligence. The real difficulty of moral conduct, namely the presence or absence of goodwill, is simply denied by the romantic belief in the native goodness of man; it is no longer the power of choice, but the mere power of knowing and feeling, which becomes the determining influence in a man's acts, so that a persuasive presentation of noble ideals is all that is needed to bring about the conversion of the most thorough scoundrel. But there is one idea in this exposition to which Shelley clings persistently and, as we hope to show, with good reason: it is that poetry does not act directly to change the lives of its hearers and that this indirectness is essential to its influence. Like every true artist, Shelley has an instinctive horror of didacticism.

VIII. TRAGEDY

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 institution, to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms 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 the other. On the modern stage a few only of the elements capable of

1 From the fragment, *Speculations on Morals.*

2 *Ibid.*

expressing the image of the poet's conception are employed 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 appropriated 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 mimicry. 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. It is perhaps the intervention of this principle which determines the balance in favor of King Lear against the Oedipus Tyrannus or the Agamemnon, or, if you will, the trilogies 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 dramatic 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 Autos, has attempted to fulfil 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 the substitution of the rigidly-defined and ever-repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition for the living impersonations of the truth of human passion.

But I digress. — 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 or 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 example of moral cause and effect.

The drama at Athens, or wheresoever else it may have approached to its perfection, ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age. The tragedies of the Athenian poets are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, stripped 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 imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived; the good affections are strengthened by pity, indignation, terror and sorrow, and an exalted calm is prolonged from the satiety of this high exercise of them into the tumult of familiar life; even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice. In the 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 upon that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

The subject of the drama seems to be taken up by Shelley at this point because of the close relation between the theatre and social morality, but he makes little attempt to fit his remarks on this new theme into his discussion of the relation between art and morals, beginning as he does, with a confessed digression, wherein he contrasts the richness of the Greek dramatic medium with the poverty of our own and, even when it is a question of the tremendous power over human conduct of high tragedy, disregarding completely the problem of its possible direction towards evil as well as good.

The moderns, according to his first paragraph, have made a profound error in depriving the drama of the cooperation of music, painting, the dance and religion. By a rather unusual choice of terms, he states that, in bringing about this separation, they have missed the true philosophy of the drama, so that we are led to think that for him all these secondary factors, if used in conjunction with the stage, become essential and indivisible elements of a single art. If this be his meaning, it does not seem in accord with the only critical study representative of the comprehension of their theatre enjoyed by the ancient Greeks themselves; Aristotle plainly distinguishes tragedy from the arts which accompanied it in the classical age and even appears to acknowledge that a play can be a complete entity apart from its representation on the stage.[1] On the whole, it seems that modern tragedy, in dispensing with the aid of the other arts, has admittedly lost something in magnificence and solemnity, and now makes a greater demand on the audience; but by this very sacrifice it has gained in directness and intensity of effect. However, the point is a minor one and perhaps does not deserve special notice.

The only other matter requiring our attention in this passage is the remarkable acknowledgement of the manner in which comedy can procure "an extension of the dramatic circle." Shelley, who appears to have been deficient in humour, and could not endure what seemed to him the cruelty of the comedy of manners, was perhaps the better able to appreciate the sublimation which comedy should undergo before it is allowed a role in great tragedy, as well as to feel how perfectly this is realised in *King Lear*. In Shakespeare's play, humour is not used to provide relief; nor surely to heighten by contrast the horror of actions already dreadful enough; it serves rather to permit a detachment and comprehension which could be attained in no other way. Within the play, the Fool has an uncanny air of seeming to reflect the king's own inner conscience, the sane and just counsel which his reason utters but which passion, pride and self-will prevent him from translating into conduct. If we remember that what is called sense of humour is no sense at all, but the expression of intellect in its most detached attitudes, this strange personage may be interpreted as the sense of humour of the king himself, his power of judging the incongruity and folly of his own acts, — which has somehow become separated, and follows him about, loyal and steadfast to the end, but unable to pay respect where it is not deserved, and irremediably exiled from the mind which should be its seat:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate that let thy folly in
And they dear judgement out.

Seen from outside, from the dramatist's standpoint, the Fool is the indispensable means of "extending the dramatic circle" to make possible an ultimate criticism. Like the chorus of Greek tragedy, but in a far more thorough fashion, he represents a supreme detachment of view. And whether he

1 *Poetics*, 1450b17, 1453b1-12.

be considered as a personage contributing to the living whole of the plot, or as an instrument for the expression of the playwright's views, his foolishness is essential to him. The deepest reason for this lies in the fact that it would simply be contrary to dramatic probability to have judgements like his pronounced by a normal person, since it is an inevitable consequence of our servitude to passion and our embroilment in the concerns of life that we expect and are willing to receive such wisdom from such personages only as are somehow immune from these toils, like the child, or the man who has remained childlike of mind. The tragic poet, then, who would have pure intellect enter upon his scene, who would pass a higher than human sentence upon the deeds of men, must, like Heaven itself, "use the foolish things of this world to confound the wise." At this height comedy encourages meditation rather than laughter, and indeed deserves, in Shelley's words, to be considered "universal, ideal, and sublime."

In the second paragraph of the group the principal subject of discussion is recalled with a reference to the unfailing parallel observed between the condition of the theatre and the prevailing morality, yet still without any attempt to face the chief difficulty in the question of art and morals, which is to explain how works, apparently excellent from an artistic viewpoint, can seem to violate the basic principles of ethics. All we find is the unhelpful assertion repeated that any art which does mischief is not true art, and this is followed in the last paragraph by an exposition of the manner in which great drama procures a good effect on human conduct. The magnificent sentences given to this purpose do not, accordingly, advance us very far in the direction we are supposed to be moving, but retain an immense value for the light they shed on the nature of tragedy and of art itself.

Shelley begins by noting for a second time that greatness in the drama has "ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age." Although the matter is of no great importance, it might be well to offer something of a corrective to the poet's enthusiasm by remarking that this co-existence need only mean that high moral and intellectual ideals were esteemed or, perhaps, merely acknowledged at the time such drama was composed. Its composition does not necessarily suppose that such high ideals were actually accepted. A high Christian morality might easily be appreciated by a modern audience, for example, which had no thought or intention of applying it, but which had merely retained enough of the traditional attitudes and sentiments of Christianity to be able to enjoy and admire that in which it no longer believed. The defence of great art does not require that we be able to point to the tangible and measurable good it has accomplished; and Shelley is wiser when he sets out to expose the inner working of great drama and to show merely that it is of a nature powerfully to transmit high moral principles to the public.

The comparison of the great Greek tragedies to "mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself" is a fine testimony to the necessity of the image for all forceful human communication. Simple reflection or self-examina-

tion remains an imperfect and difficult mode of knowing and, in a sense, even an unnatural one. As was suggested in an earlier chapter, it is always more effective to offer the mind an object it can reach directly and upon which all the mental faculties may be exercised. "Neither the eye nor the mind," we are told a little later, "can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles." The spectator attains the truest view of himself in the images of his own life and character which are set before him on the tragic scene, catching vivid reflections of his own nature in good and evil personages alike.

But the image of self he is given is not a simple, unchanged reflection; what he sees is self "under a thin disguise of circumstance," — the disguise being that which is adverted to, while causing the spectator not to advert to the effect the play is having upon him. Under this convincing cloak of character and incident, the general principles or types of action are able to get by his defences and to demand the assent of inner conscience. This is the fictional aspect of the play, which must be neither very pronounced, nor very slight. The first extreme would mean the stifling of meaning and universality, and the mere provision of distraction without enlightenment, as in melodrama. The second would mean a weakening or destruction of the nature of the image, so that the dramatic personages would become little more than articulate concepts, dull and unconvincing. The disguise of circumstance must be thin, therefore, but never absent. By various means, of which the tragic mask was one, the Greeks made sure that it would remain thin. Through a device of this kind the tragic personage could be sufficiently removed from the circumstances of daily life so as to appear unmistakably a significance as well as a man, and there would then survive upon the stage only that "ideal perfection which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become." The mask contributed to the achievement of a final effect which was total and integral, not "partial and inharmonious," as is the result, according to Shelley, when modern drama places its reliance on the actor's countenance, and skill in simulating emotion.

This ideal perfection is spoken of as internal; it lies within us. Great tragedy neither preaches, nor exhorts, nor even urges to emulation; it simply enables us to discover our own essential greatness by furnishing an image of our nature stripped of all the accretions and meaningless attributes of ordinary existence. This human nature, whose unchangeable forms are portrayed so compellingly by the heroes of the stage, is shared by the humblest onlooker and, in the dramatic mirror, he may see himself as he should be and may make comparison between his own turbulent world of passion and unreason and the ideal condition it might reach. Here, on the tragic scene, all things are set in a true and clear light. Beauty and goodness wear that unmistakable crown of excellence which they do not always show when met with in the street, and are known for what they are. Wicked characters, as well as good, are made to serve the ideal; first, because in them evil takes clear shape and is half-conquered simply in being comprehended; secondly, because they suggest, and heighten by

contrast, the very ideals which they violate. Poetry, therefore, in the exquisite phrases of a later paragraph, may not only "exalt the beauty of that which is most beautiful," but also "add beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change." Within the magic bounds of the image, all becomes one, intelligible, purposeful; "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."

When a few sentences in praise of tragedy can carry such beauty and conviction, what shall be said of the influence of tragedy itself? By its power the imagination will be "enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty . . .": the audience's power of grasping and conceiving is strengthened by the comprehension of a great and typical human struggle. The ideals of great tragedy, which are the permanent expression of the laws of our nature, strengthen the inclination of the beholder to realise them in his own life; strengthen, in other words, his natural love of what is true, just, and honorable. And they achieve this end by arousing the "good affections," pity and fear, where these are due, compassion for the sufferings of the innocent, indignation and horror at the sight of evil triumphant. It is never simple stimulation of feeling which is the aim of tragedy; emotions for their own sake are the business of melodrama and, if not without a certain recreational value, can never deserve to be called good as the word is used here, nor can they promote that "exalted calm" which extends its influence into real life. The emotional exercise concerned in tragedy is one which brings about a certain discipline and harmony in the passions, so that the passion felt in the theatre will be vastly different from that felt in the street, the former never endangering the dominion of reason.

For the basic thing to remember about passion is that it is indeed passion, the imposition upon us of physical disturbance which is the inevitable consequence of the dependence of intellect upon sense. Often enough, reason cannot foresee, cannot even interpret, the confusion of feelings by which it may be suddenly overwhelmed. Man is gloomy or gay without cause, longs for he knows not what, or finds himself, at some event, an inextricable tangle of conflicting feelings. And even when there exist good and unmistakable causes for his sentiments, there is still an obscure subjection of intellect in all strong emotion from which we demand release, it being something like a contradiction of the nature of intelligence that it should be made to endure what it has not chosen, and to a degree beyond the measure it would apply. The tragic poem procures for us this liberation by giving us an image of passion towards which we can take an attitude of contemplative detachment, quite impossible where the passion is personal and actual. Within the little world of the play, there is nothing to bewilder or disconcert; the passion here, however overwhelming or uncontrolled in representation, can never arouse uncontrollable emotion in the onlooker, since, in true drama, it is presented as an object of thought as well as of feeling, and hence as always in harmony with the design of the whole play.

Tragedy, therefore, arouses feelings purged of that irrationality inseparable from the passion of daily existence. Under its influence, our feelings follow a certain harmonious conduct and sequence, whereby we never seem to lose sight of what we are feeling and why, and in the course of which our self-control is never threatened. Thus, the villain of the play, monster though he may be, is an image delightful to the mind, if only for this reason, that he makes possible an untroubled consideration of wickedness that could scarcely be borne were it actual. Besides which, the artistic intelligence has constructed his character so that it makes sense, so that we may know just how to feel towards him, so that our hatred of him is free and detached, so that we detest with the mind. In the preface to his own tragedy, Shelley remarks:

> This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it would be insupportable. The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring.[1]

Here is our principle, clearly enough expressed, although we would be inclined to reject the implication in the last phrase that there is poetry in actual crime even before the dramatist has worked on it; it may be an object capable of being seen poetically, perhaps, but can hardly be termed poetry before it has been so seen and expressed.

The influence of art upon the passions, then, is instructive and disciplinary; it arouses them according as it is right that they should be aroused, in relation to proper objects, and in the measure that these objects deserve.[2] A work of art can thus become, in a certain sense, a rehearsal for life, offering us semblances of good and evil upon which we may practise our minds and, at the same time, suggesting the judgements we ought to pass. Not that it will ever be possible really to live the play, or always to see how actual incidents may be made to fall into the enviable order and solution which the skill of the dramatist has conferred upon those of some great tragedy. The gulf between the real and the poetic is simply unbridgeable; it is irrational to attempt to transpose the two and more irrational still to condemn poetry because it does not offer us a scheme translatable into fact. Human life is at the mercy of chance and change and it is a delusion to hope that we shall be able to live from day to day by any means other than the improvisations of prudence. Yet the drama can plainly exert great influence over our lives, being, no mere escape from life, but a noble attempt to understand it, addressing itself to us by the most effective of all means of communication, chastening and clarifying our emotions, in order that we may behold in a calm, clear light ideals which, in the tumult of familiar existence, it is only too easy to neglect.

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1 It is in this sense his strange remarks on sorrow in a later paragraph should probably be interpreted: "Tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. . . . The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself." There is no comfort in actual grief; it is the pleasure caused by an image of grief which is unique.

2 Cf. J. MARITAIN, *Art et scolastique*, p.107.

"Even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature." The tragedy of fate, which the poet clearly has in mind, supposes in its audience a high degree of intelligence, able to find relief in any solution, no matter how terrible. Under the shadow of fate, crime cannot, of course, be true crime, since it is no longer the effect of free will; "like flies to wanton boys," men writhe in the clutches of the gods, and find their only refuge in dignity and defiance. But it is hardly to be supposed that Shelley finds in this explanation the same detached satisfaction which it provided to the Greek mind. Probably it is the pity of the Greek drama which stirs him more; the romanticist in him being overcome at the spectacle of goodness and innocence driven by ignorance, or by the pressure of seemingly irresistible causes, to the commission of some foul deed. All crime tends to be seen in the same way by romanticism, as error, mistake, or the result of chance rather than purpose. Beatrice Cenci is described as "evidently a most gentle and amiable being, a creature formed to adorn and be admired, and thus violently thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion." Her act of parricide, a "pernicious mistake," is stated to have been voluntary, yet to have been committed under such diabolical provocation as to compel us to consider her an object of compassion rather than of condemnation.

Being thus convinced that error must be "divested of its wilfulness," Shelley naturally feels that "drama of the highest order" will necessarily take up the fate-theme and, since it will not permit men to look upon evil "as the creation of their choice," will allow them to find in it "little food for censure or hatred." But we are obliged to maintain against him that the tragedy of fate is not the highest possible, if only because it is not the truest. Genuine malice is only too vivid a fact of human experience, and the best poetic image will imitate it as such. That crime, by virtue of the image, will always be "disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion," has already been shown to be true for reasons intrinsic to the nature of art and having nothing to do with any particular view of life; but it may yet be presented as a deliberate act, justly deserving of censure and hatred. The blackest scoundrel, it is true, may inspire a certain sympathy for the reason that the vicious tendencies we see carried to an ultimate pitch in him are those of our common nature, so that we cry "God forgive us all," but this carries with it no obligation to condone. Similarly we can agree that even a portrait of vice may teach us self-knowledge, but it will surely leave us small self-respect.

In the splendid periodic sentence which brings to a close the passage we are studying, authentic drama is compared to a mirror which not only possesses many facets, capable of receiving light from many directions, and of casting back reflections of the subject in all its postures and attitudes, but also exerts the virtue of the prism, to reveal the hidden color and heart of the radiance which falls upon it. This magic glass, held up to human nature, collects its brightest rays, and divides them from the simplicity of their elementary forms, reproducing them as so divided. It touches the

brightest rays of human nature with an even higher majesty and beauty, multiplying all that it reflects, and endowing all that it reflects with the faculty of generating a power like its own.

Itself a piece of poetry, this great final sentence is an illustration of the principle explained in our first chapter, whereby the poetic image was held to proceed from two originals, as it were, an actual and an ideal, and to express one in terms of the other. Wishing to convince us of the power of dramatic art to draw the disparate elements of life towards an integral whole, Shelley chooses, not to state the truth directly, but rather to offer a splendid image of it. The result, odd though it may sound, is like an image of the doctrine of imitation, and is susceptible of two mutually supporting interpretations, according as we approach the passage from the direction of the actual or the ideal. For the light caught by the dramatic mirror might first be thought of as deriving from ordinary human life, being the rays of significance which the poetic vision can detect in even the humblest doings of mankind and which it has power to withdraw or separate from the contingent and meaningless, in order to gather them into a central meaning much as the scientific mind carries a process of induction from many individual cases towards the goal of a general law; the reward of the mind's labor in both instances being a final truth which can serve to illuminate difficulties and problems previously insoluble and become the means of dealing with those yet to be encountered. The preface to *The Cenci* again has something to offer us:

> Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.

But the simile of the mirror need not be taken as excluding the idealising power of poetry, for the "brightest rays of human nature" may also be considered as coming forth, not from everyday, pedestrian human nature, but from ideal human nature, being the pure radiance of its "unchangeable forms"; which will be tempered for mortal eyes by the prismatic potency of art. The fact that the rays are spoken of as being divided and reproduced from "the simplicity of their elementary forms" would seem to favor the present interpretation, according to which a given play would transmit eternal principles by giving them expression in character, opinion and incident, imparting to them color and conviction, and driving them home as a teacher will convey a central principle by a series of examples and illustrations, conferring upon it by such means a richness and force no mere straightforward statement can ever possess. In either case, it should be noted that the general effect will be to present a unity which overcomes, without annihilating it, a multiplicity; and a meaning which gathers into itself the unmeaning.[1]

1 The Aristotelian mind will probably be inclined to see the poetic process as more essentially the drawing of a universal from the contingent and particular, but of course without excluding the other possibility. "The thing which makes a good man different from a unit in the crowd... or an artistic representation different

The phrases which follow, and in which the poetic mirror is said to multiply all that it reflects and to touch it with majesty and beauty, are again themselves comparable to a double-sided mirror. According to our first alternative, it might be argued that, as each incident or detail from the unintelligible plurality of life enters into the new unity of the work of art, it is "multiplied," that is, raised to a higher power, to an intensity of significance it never possessed before. Like the forest pools in one of Shelley's most charming poems, the drama will reflect what it has received "with more than truth expressed,"[1] transmuting matters of fact into universal meanings; the commonplace, nay, even the ugly and the evil, as we have said already, will be, through this sublime influence, "touched with majesty and beauty" by their assignment to a necessary role in the working out of some lofty purpose. But, following the second alternative, the elemental features of ideal nature which it is the function of poetry to reflect, would be "multiplied" in the sense of their embodiment in innumerable plays, or in the many personages, incidents and images of a single play; and would be "touched with majesty and beauty" in that their colorless and formless essence, or the bare meaning for which science can teach respect but not love, would be adorned and made irresistible by being clothed in music and imagery taken from the world about us.

Finally, from whatever source the drama be thought to have drawn its significance, it will possess, as a statement having the nature of a universal, the power of "propagating its like," that is, of reaching an indefinite multitude of minds and of being applicable to a multitude of particular cases. As we shall see later, it is the especial virtue of the image to appear inexhaustible in significance and forever to invite new interpretations.

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from an ordinary reality — is that elements which are elsewhere scattered and separate are here combined in a unity. [It is this unity which counts]; for if you take the elements separately, you may say of an artistic representation that it is surpassed by the eye of this person or by some other feature of that."—*The Politics of Aristotle* (trans. E. BARKER, Oxford, 1946), chap.XI, 1281b.

[1] *To Jane: The Recollection.* Several lines of this poem are pleasant instances of a true poet's instinctive awareness of the power of the image:

We paused beside the pools that lie
Under the forest bough. —
Each seemed as 'twere a little sky
Gulfed in a world below;
. . . . . .
In which the lovely forests grew,
As in the upper air,
More perfect both in shape and hue
Than any spreading there.
. . . . . .
Sweet views which in our world above
Can never well be seen,
Were imaged by the water's love
Of that fair forest green.
. . . . . .
Like one beloved the scene had lent
To the dark water's breast,
Its every leaf and lineament
With more than truth expressed.