Romanticism &
Shelley’s Defense of Poetry

Proto-Romanticism (Potted Version)

Kant is among the most important predecessors of the literary/artistic/cultural/political phenomenon known as Romanticism (together, especially, with Rousseau, who was a great influence on Kant’s thought).

*The High Enlightenment:*

An empiricist view of art and the world (e.g., Hume’s) assigns relatively little importance to human creativity and individuality.

A determinist view of the world (e.g., Paley’s) that leaves little room for human freedom.
From Kant to Romanticism

- For Kant, as we have seen, we do not have access to “things in themselves,” instead we have no alternative but to understand the world through our mind, from our human point of view.

Taken to an extreme, this view becomes (metaphysical) idealism: The idea that the external world is somehow created by our minds. (Kant does not go quite that far: ‘noumena’, presumably, are out there somewhere.)

- In art and aesthetics, idealism seems to gain some additional support from Kant’s idea of genius...

Romantic Genius

...so much so that some early German Romantics transpose Kant’s ‘coordinating’ functions of the mind into creative functions that somehow ‘make the world’ (as the artist creates an artwork)

Novalis: “The world is a dream, and the dream becomes a world.”

- This leads to a near deification of genius in Romantic art and aesthetics...
Some Revolutionary Slogans

- ‘Nothing and no one can place rules upon genius. Genius is a law unto itself.’
- ‘There is no reality outside the reality that genius creates.’
- ‘Genius can be bound by no limits, not even by the limits of its own achievements.’

Cf., Coleridge: “Every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.”

Descendents of the Romantic Genius

- Our latter day “preoccupation with authenticity and originality in art.” (Dayton, 7); the avant-garde.
- The subordination of imitation to expression.
- Criticism focused on the biography and character of the artist (qua genius), as opposed to the actual artistic production.
- Veneration of imagination as immediate, sensuous knowledge; of symbolism as the special instinct of the genius for making the invisible and/or the infinite sensuously present.
Other Aspects of Romanticism

“Romanticism” is notoriously difficult to define adequately, but some further characteristics include:

- Freedom from “classical” restrictions in art
- Preference for strong emotions, extreme situations (e.g., Caspar David Friedrich, William Blake, P. Shelley)
- Veneration of the ‘dark’ Middle Ages/Gothic Christianity in contrast to classical/Enlightenment order and light. (<Romances; e.g., the legend of King Arthur)
- Veneration of nature; distrust of technology and the industrial revolution (e.g., Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein)
- Etc. etc.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
(1792-1822)

- Among the greatest English Romantic poets (though his fame is largely posthumous).

But it seems fairly clear that Shelley is responding to other philosophical figures as well (e.g., Plato).
Reason vs. Imagination

- **Reason**: The *to logizein* or principle of analysis. Reason relates one thought to another; it relates and enumerates.

- **Imagination**: The *to poiein* or principle of synthesis. Imagination "colors [thoughts] with its own light"; it perceives value and finds similitudes.

  "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance." (90)

  I.e., imagination is not subordinate to reason as Peacock (or Plato) might suppose, but is instead a kind of necessary condition for the operation of reason.

Poetry

Poetry: "the expression of the imagination"

Like winds on the strings of an Aeolian lyre, human beings resound with the external and internal impressions (i.e., natural and social influences) that are driven upon them.

Imagination adds harmony to this Aeolian melody.
In the Beginning...

- In the "youth of the world" people danced and sang and imitated natural objects.

And they observed in these activities "a certain rhythm or order" (91) which is the source of the pleasure that they take in these activities.

"Taste," says Shelley, is what we now call "the sense of an approximation to this order"

- Poets are those people for whom taste "exists in excess"

The Original Poetry

- **Shelley**: Poetry, as the expression of the imagination, did not arise simply as a means of describing (imitating) things. (Compare, e.g., Aristotle)

- Instead, poetry is the origin of language: "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry" (91)

  Poetry is the original making of language, the creative ordering of experience. (A proto- ‘dead metaphor’ theory of language)
But Wait, There’s More...

- Poets are... “not only the authors of language and of music” they are also...

  “…the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion.” (91)

  “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (93) (Compare, e.g., Plato, who “was essentially a poet...”, 92)

Poetry’s Effects Upon Society

- The great instrument of moral good is not ethics (i.e., ethical science, ethical reasoning) but imagination.

  Ethical science simply arranges (analyzes) the elements that poetry (the expression of the imagination) has first synthesized.

- Poetry strengthens and enlarges the imagination, “the organ of the moral nature of man”

  (Cf, e.g., Hirsch, Rorty on moral education)
“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.” (105)