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## Truth and metaphor: a defence of Shelley

Nor heed, nor see, what things they be;  
But from these create he can  
Forms more real than living man,  
Nurslings of immortality.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, written in 1821 but not published until 1840, is the first part of an intended two-part (or even three-part) essay. It was written in reply to Thomas Love Peacock's essay *The four ages of poetry*, published in the first issue of *Olliers literary miscellany* in 1820.<sup>1</sup> Peacock had argued that poetry had a cyclical history of growth and decline, and that currently poetry was in a state of decline, obsessed with the past, and over-shadowed by the "progress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowledge".<sup>2</sup> The contemporary poet was compared unfavourably with the contemporary scientist, philosopher and historian:

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 babies of the age.<sup>3</sup>

Poetry in the modern age of reason, according to Peacock, was "not useful".<sup>4</sup> Even if poetry were to be defended on the basis of its being "ornamental [...] to be cultivated for the pleasure it yields",<sup>5</sup> there were more than enough "good poems already existing",<sup>6</sup> and he lambasted the contemporary poet for being "a semi-barbarian in a civilised community [...] a waster of his own time, and a robber of that of others".<sup>7</sup> Although Peacock was himself a poet and a novelist, and a friend of Shelley's, and hence was being ironic in much of his attack, Shelley was stirred into writing a reply. As he said to Peacock:

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *The four ages of poetry*, in *Olliers literary miscellany in prose and verse by several hands to be continued occasionally*, No. 1, 183–200, London 1820; reprinted in and quoted from: Perkins (1967: 758–65).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*: 765.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 763.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 764.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 764.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 764.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 763f.

I am enchanted with your *Literary Miscellany*, although the last article [*The Four Ages of Poetry*] it contains has excited my polemical faculties so violently, that the moment I get rid of my ophthalmia, I mean to set about an answer to it, which I will send to you, if you please. It is very clever, but, I think, very false.<sup>8</sup>

Shelley first decided to write an open letter to *Olliers literary miscellany*, and then to write a long essay for the magazine, which would consist of two (or possibly three) parts. The first part would consist of a defence of poetry in general, and the second a defence of contemporary poetry. (What the third part might or would consist of is not known.) As he said in a letter to Peacock accompanying the manuscript of the first part:

I dispatch by this post the first part of an essay intended to consist of three parts, which I design for an antidote to your *Four Ages of Poetry*. You will see that I have taken a more general view of what poetry is than you have, and will perhaps agree with several of my positions.<sup>9</sup>

*Olliers literary miscellany*, however, collapsed after its first number. Shelley then sent his essay to John Hunt at *The Liberal*, a recently established magazine edited by Leigh Hunt with the assistance of Lord Byron and Shelley. Hunt prepared the manuscript for publication by removing the half a dozen direct references to Peacock's essay, and thus, as H.F.B. Brett-Smith has said: "by a little judicious excision the *Defence* was already transformed from a controversial article to a general treatise on Poetry".<sup>10</sup> Subsequent to Shelley's tragic death in 1822, *The Liberal* collapsed after its fourth issue in 1823, without publishing the essay, which was still in manuscript form. It remained unpublished until 1840 when Mary Shelley included it in the posthumous collection *Essays, letters from abroad, translations and fragments, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*.<sup>11</sup>

The version published was that of Hunt's edited manuscript, which still promised a "second part" that would consist of "an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of poetry" (D 1086). It was now presented however as a self-contained confession of poetic faith on the part of Shelley. It is this essay which contains the famous line "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (D 1087). Since then the essay has been accepted as a general statement of the principles of Romantic poetry, alongside Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).

In this essay I want to argue that the account of poetry given in Shelley's *A defence of poetry* is largely an account of the language of poetry.

<sup>8</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, letter to Thomas Love Peacock. Cited in the introduction of Brett-Smith (1921 xiii).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: xiv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A defence of poetry*, in *Essays, letters from abroad, translations and fragments, by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary Shelley, London 1840: 1-57; reprinted in and quoted from Perkins (1967: 1072-87), hereafter abbreviated as D.

More specifically, it is an account of how the language of poetry differs from the language of science in that it consists of metaphors. I want to argue that in the course of outlining his position on metaphors Shelley advances an innovative thesis, namely: that a metaphor is a representation of extra-linguistic reality, which has a synthetic truth-value, such that it is true if it is an accurate representation of extra-linguistic reality. I further want to argue that Shelley's thesis about metaphor has been misinterpreted by several critics, among them David Cooper and Richard Rorty, and that their misinterpretations are due not to random or idiosyncratic factors but to their sharing the assumption that a metaphor cannot be considered as a candidate for truth-value. Finally, I want to argue that an understanding of Shelley's defence of the candidacy for truth-value of metaphors should prompt an examination of this assumption, and here I draw upon recent research on metaphor and language carried out by Raymond Gibbs.

*A Defence of Poetry* consists of an account of "what is poetry, and who are poets" (D 1075), followed by an account of the (entirely beneficial) effect of poetry upon society, and the beginnings of a defence of contemporary poetry against Peacock's criticisms. Here I am only concerned with Shelley's account of what poetry is, and of which authors are to be considered as poets. According to Shelley, poetry is the expression of the faculty of imagination in man as opposed to the faculty of reason. The faculty of imagination works on the "principle of synthesis, and has for its object those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself" (D 1072). The faculty of reason works on the "principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results" (D 1072). As such, poetry is:

the centre and circumference of all knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all. (D1084)

Poetry is that which "strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms" (D 1085). A poem contains "eternal truth" (D 1075). A poem captures "the unchangeable forms of human nature" (D 1075). A poet is someone who apprehends "the true and the beautiful" (D 1073). A poet is "capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things" (D 1075). A poet uses language, because:

language [...] is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than colour, form, or motion. (D 1074)

The language of poets is "unmeasured language" (D 1074), which is not to be distinguished from prose, but rather from "measured language" (D

1074), such as the language of "Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire [...] and their disciples", who were "mere reasoners" (D 1083). The most important passage in the essay about the unmeasured language of poets is as follows:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world" – and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry. (D 1073)

In this respect "Plato was essentially a poet – the truth and splendour of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive" (D 1074). Bacon was also a poet, and the Bible is poetry. Indeed "all the authors of revolutions in opinion [...] as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth" (D 1074), are poets. Nor does a writer's entire work have to consist of poetry in order for him to be a poet:

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 may even 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. (D 1075)

Finally the unmeasured language of poets is such that it cannot be translated without serious loss:

Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. (D 1074)

According to Shelley's account, then, poetry is unmeasured language, and poets are those individuals who write or speak in unmeasured language. Although Shelley only uses the word "metaphor" once in the *Defence*, I want to argue that for Shelley what distinguishes unmeasured language from measured language is that it consists of metaphors. I consider this to be the implication of the statement that the words of poets unveil the permanent analogy of things by *images*, since metaphors are most commonly images, or at least, are most commonly identified with images.<sup>12</sup> When Shelley talks of the splendour of Plato's imagery, or when he says that a

single word from an otherwise unremarkable passage or book may be considered as poetry, and celebrates the living images contained in the work of historians, I consider that he is primarily referring to the use of *metaphors* in such works. This also applies to what he has to say about translation, for it is metaphors which are commonly accepted to be the most difficult elements of language to translate.

Since poetry is unmeasured language, and since what distinguishes unmeasured language is that it consists of metaphors, Shelley's claims about poetry in general can, I argue, be read as claims about metaphors. It is *metaphors* which strip the veil of familiarity from the world and lay bare its true forms. This (metaphorical) language of metaphysical realism is, of course, taken from Plato, who is referred to five times in the essay and alluded to several times, and whose dialogues *Ion* and the *Symposium* Shelley had translated despite his own admonition against translation. Indeed Shelley was a lifelong Platonistic metaphysical realist. The difference between Plato's metaphysical realism and Shelley's is that, for Shelley, it is metaphors which reveal the true forms of the world rather than the literal statements of philosophy or science. It is metaphors which mark the pre-given relations of the world-in-itself (the "footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world", as Bacon said). To put this another way: for Shelley it is *metaphors* which are representations of extra-linguistic reality.

As this position on metaphors would entail, for Shelley a metaphor is a candidate for truth-value (that is, a metaphor is something which can be either true or false). When poets perceive and teach the truth, they do so with metaphors. The imaginative faculty works on the principle of synthesis, and is concerned with the forms common to universal nature, or the natural kinds of extra-linguistic reality. A metaphor, then, is a representation of extra-linguistic reality, which is true if it is an accurate representation of extra-linguistic reality.

Another important implication of reading Shelley's claims about unmeasured language as claims about metaphors is that it identifies measured language with literal language. Thus the language of scientists (and all 'mere reasoners') is literal language. Furthermore Shelley does not consider the literal statements of science to have a synthetic truth-value. Measured language is the product of the faculty of reason, which works on the principle of analysis, and is concerned with relations between things which are already known ("Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known", D 1072). A literal statement is a representation of a relation between two or more known things. It follows that literal statements have an analytic truth-value, or a truth-value determined by the relation which holds between the two known things. Thus a literal statement is a representation of a relation between two or more known things, which is true if the relation holds.

<sup>12</sup> In his essay *Politics and the English language*, George Orwell repeatedly makes the point that metaphors are to be identified with images: "A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image"; "The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image." (Orwell ([1946]1994: 350, 355).

It is for this reason that Shelley asserts the temporal and logical priority of metaphorical language to literal language: "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry". Representations of extra-linguistic reality are temporally and logically prior to representations of relations between known things; that is, synthetic metaphors are temporally and logically prior to analytic literal statements. An important implication of this is that it explains literal language as synthetic metaphors which have over time become analytic statements ("until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of integral thoughts"). Thus when a metaphor, such as "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", becomes so known and acknowledged that it becomes an analytical relation of identity, it changes from being a metaphor to being a literal statement. Furthermore, if there are no new metaphors created by new poets, language will come to consist entirely of literal statements ("language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse").

Shelley's thesis about metaphors is thus an innovative one. He inverts the traditional relation between metaphorical language and literal language, granting metaphors logical and temporal priority. He identifies the metaphorical/literal distinction with the synthetic/analytic distinction, and grants metaphors a synthetic truth-value, while only granting literal statements an analytic truth-value.

Shelley's thesis about metaphors, however, is one which has often been misinterpreted. Here I shall focus on two critics who have misinterpreted him – David Cooper and Richard Rorty.

In his book *Metaphor*, David Cooper discusses what he calls the "primacy of metaphor" thesis,<sup>13</sup> which he summarises as "the thesis, very roughly, that metaphorical talk is temporally and logically prior to literal talk".<sup>14</sup> About this thesis he says:

The thesis is, of course, interesting in its own right. But it is worth beginning by seeing why, according to it, the vicarious truth idea represents a distorted perspective. On that idea, a metaphor is to be appraised as true in virtue of the literally true propositions it leads us to. On the primacy of metaphor thesis, however, it is metaphor which provides the possibility of literal talk, and therefore literal truth. At the deep level, metaphor and truth-value are not related as possessor to possessed, but as ground to grounded.<sup>15</sup>

The primacy of metaphor thesis, then, is the thesis that metaphorical language temporally and logically precedes literal language. However, according to this thesis, a metaphor does not have a truth-value. A metaphor is neither true nor false. Instead, metaphors provide the possibility of literal

<sup>13</sup> Cooper (1986: 257).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 257.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 257f.

statements, and literal statements have a truth-value. Thus metaphors provide the possibility of truth-value. The "most famous statement of the primacy of metaphor thesis is Nietzsche's",<sup>16</sup> Cooper declares, and he quotes the famous passage on truth and metaphor from Nietzsche's essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn* (*On truth and lie in the ultramoral sense*):

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one had forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and are now no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.<sup>17</sup>

Cooper summarises what he takes to be Nietzsche's primacy of metaphor thesis as follows:

Truths, the latter is saying, are not metaphors, but the residues of metaphors. Metaphorical usage passes over into literal usage when it is perceived as fixed and binding [...]. Admittedly Nietzsche calls truths 'illusions' in the passage quoted; but he does not mean, by this, that they are, after all, falsehoods or metaphors, but that they are not truths in the sense that some philosophers have imagined – beliefs or statements which correspond to a reality independent of our perceptions and conceptions.<sup>18</sup>

The thesis, then, is that metaphors, which are neither true nor false, provide the possibility of literal statements and the possibility of truth-value for literal statements; but the truth-value of the literal statements is not that of correspondence with extra-linguistic reality.

I am not concerned here with whether or not this primacy of metaphor thesis is in fact the thesis advanced by Nietzsche in this passage.<sup>19</sup> What I am concerned with is Cooper's claim that this thesis was first advanced by Shelley:

Nietzsche was not the first to propose this view. Shelley had written, in similar vein, that 'language is vitally metaphorical [...], it marks the before unapprehended relations of things [...] until words which represent them, become signs for portions of thought'. [sic]<sup>20</sup>

As the argument of this essay makes clear, Shelley does not argue for the primacy of metaphor thesis outlined here. Shelley does indeed say that metaphors logically and temporally precede literal statements, and that they give rise to literal statements; but for Shelley a metaphor *does* have a truth-value, and this *is* the truth-value of correspondence with extra-linguistic reality.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 258.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche ([1873]1911 180).

<sup>18</sup> Cooper (1986: 258).

<sup>19</sup> For a recent interesting interpretation of Nietzsche's position on metaphor, see Tanesini (1995).

<sup>20</sup> Cooper (1986: 258).

In his book *Contingency, irony, solidarity*, Richard Rorty sets the Romantic poets against the 'Platonists and positivists' with regard to their position on metaphor:

The Platonist and the positivist share a reductionist view of metaphor: they think metaphors are either paraphrasable or useless for the one serious purpose which language has, namely, representing reality. By contrast, the Romantic has an expansionist view: he thinks metaphor is strange, mystic, wonderful. Romantics attribute metaphor to a mysterious faculty called the 'imagination', a faculty they suppose to be at the very centre of the self, the deep heart's core. Whereas the metaphorical looks irrelevant to Platonists and positivists, the literal looks irrelevant to Romantics. For the former think that the point of language is to represent a hidden reality which lies outside us, and the latter thinks its purpose is to express a hidden reality which lies within us.<sup>21</sup>

Taking Shelley as an example of 'the Romantic', and interpreting 'the Platonist' to be an orthodox Platonist philosopher, some of Rorty's claims here are true. It is true that the orthodox Platonist philosopher and positivist share a reductionist view of metaphor, and that Shelley has an expansionist view of metaphor. It is true that Shelley attributes metaphors to the faculty of imagination. And it is true that whereas metaphors seem irrelevant to the orthodox Platonist philosopher and positivist, literal statements seem irrelevant to Shelley. However, it is *not* true that Shelley has a different view of the purpose of language from the orthodox Platonistic philosopher and positivist. For Shelley the purpose of language *is* to express a hidden reality which lies outside us. The difference is that for Shelley it is *metaphors* which express this extra-linguistic reality. And this is why he truly does have an expansionist view of metaphors.

These two misinterpretations, I want to argue, are due not to random or idiosyncratic factors, but to the fact that Cooper and Rorty share the assumption that a metaphor cannot be considered as a candidate for truth-value. Another way of putting this assumption is to say that they identify all truth-value with literal language. Metaphors are always false, or are neither true nor false. The traditional identification of all truth-value with literal language has been outlined by Raymond Gibbs in his book *The poetics of mind*, as follows:

The traditional view of literal meaning also assumes that there is an intimate connection, and sometimes a strict equivalence, between literal meaning and truth. This connection between literal meaning and truth has its roots in the writing of Aristotle and the early Stoics and more recently in the 20th-century work of the logical positivists. Literal meaning is identified with 'propositional meaning', and 'propositional meaning' with 'truth-conditional meaning' [...] in this manner, literal meaning can be distinguished from other meanings, which might be labeled 'metaphoric', 'emotive', or 'poetic', that cannot be explicated in terms of truth conditions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Rorty (1989: 19).

<sup>22</sup> Gibbs (1994: 61).

Cooper, for example, says that "On the primacy of metaphor thesis, however, it is metaphor which provides the possibility of literal talk, and therefore of literal truth." Thus truth is identified with literal statements. When the truth-value of literal statements, as it turns out, is not correspondence with an extra-linguistic reality, it does not occur to Cooper to consider the possibility that the thesis might grant this kind of truth-value to *metaphors*. If literal language cannot have this kind of truth-value, then no language can, since the only other kind of language which exists – metaphorical language – is not a candidate for truth-value.

Rorty makes the same assumption. If 'the Romantic' is concerned with metaphors, then he is not concerned with truth, since a metaphor is not a candidate for truth-value. He is concerned with something other than truth. He is concerned with the strange, the mystical, the wonderful – anything except truth.

What I finally want to argue in this essay is that an understanding of Shelley's thesis about metaphor should prompt an examination of the traditional assumption that a metaphor cannot be considered as a candidate for truth-value. Even if Shelley's thesis – that metaphors are representations of extra-linguistic reality which have a synthetic truth-value – is not accepted, the historical fact that Shelley was prepared to defend the candidacy for truth-value of metaphors should lead to reflection on the assumption that metaphors are always false, or else neither true nor false. If metaphors are always false, this means that they are false according to the same truth-value which determines that a false literal statement is false. But this means that metaphors are merely a subset of all false literal statements, which seems absurd. If metaphors are neither true nor false, then it does seem, as recent research on metaphor has revealed, that speakers and writers spend a great deal of time using expressions which are not concerned with truth and falsehood in contexts which suggest otherwise. As Raymond Gibbs has commented:

A great deal of our knowledge and thinking is constituted by metaphorical mappings from dissimilar source and target domains. Many of our most basic concepts (e.g. causation, time, love, anger) are, at the very least, partly constituted by metaphor. Scientific theories, legal reasoning, myths, art, and a variety of cultural practices exemplify many of the same figurative schemes found in everyday thought and language.<sup>23</sup>

This evidence casts doubt upon the claim that metaphors are to be considered as neither truth nor false, and vindicates Shelley's defence of the candidacy for truth-value of metaphors. Although Gibbs finishes his book by saying that his argument is not similar to that of "the Romantics' heralding of imagination over rationality in which, as Shelley claimed, *poets are the*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 435f.

*unacknowledged legislators of the world*",<sup>24</sup> his conclusion reads like a summary of the most important part of Shelley's defence: "My plea is for a greater recognition of the poet in each one of us – to recognise that figuration is not an escape from reality."<sup>25</sup> This, too, was Shelley's plea.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.. 454.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.. 454.