

# Shelley's Debt upon Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry*: New Perspectives on Romantic Poetry

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This paper tries to analyse the relevance of Thomas Love Peacock as a close influence for Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1821), and it tries to present new perspectives about Romanticism in general, in the light of Peacock's ideas. We can say that although Peacock is generally considered a minor figure and is left outside the literary canon of the Romantic Movement, his work *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820) proves to be the main basis for Shelley's *Defence*, without which the latter would not exist. Critics have pointed out this relation but they have not analysed in detail Peacock's contribution with this essay.

For example, Kjellin in *Talkative Banquets* (1974), establishes the relationship between both authors, stating that Peacock's work is a harsh attack on poetry, as we can see in the following quotation:

A year after Peacock had given up his life as a free poet he published an essay, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, which on the surface is a devastating attack on poetry as being an outmoded and superfluous intellectual activity in a modern and progressive society. This essay is perhaps best known for the answer it provoked, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. (12)

In the same sense Butler, in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981), admits that Peacock's essay shows his clear effect when he considers that "Shelley's *Defence* is a sustained response to Peacock's liberal critique of the Coleridgean elevation of poetry and the poet". (167). Ousby, in *The Wordsworth Companion to English Literature* (1992), also considers Peacock's work as the central motif for Shelley's *Defence*, and he gives us a clear hint about the critical tone of Peacock's essay:

The fragmentary *Essay on Fashionable Literature* (1818) and *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820) are Peacock's most systematic critical writings, and the scepticism expressed in the latter concerning the social value and utility of art and literature in an age of philosophy and science provoked Shelley, who perhaps overlooked his friend's tongue-in-cheek manner, to write his *A Defence of Poetry*. (715)

However, other critics see the relation between Peacock's essay and Shelley's *Defence* from another point of view, and they question Shelley's debt and Peacock's quality as critic. For example, Van Doren (1911) asserts that "Shelley's *Defence*, as it now stands, shows

little trace of being a reply to Peacock except in an over-emphasis upon the utility of poets" (154). In fact, Shelley did not answer Peacock's ideas one by one following Peacock's ordered format: his vigorous defence was caused by Peacock's negative tone and ironic view about Poetry, the Poet and Romanticism in *The Four Ages*. On the other hand, critics outstand the contrast between their two different styles and tones. For example, using Madden's (1967) words when referring to both essays, Peacock's style is "witty, paradoxical and satirical", his thought is "logical" and the diction "precise" (28), while Shelley lacks "the witty playfulness of Peacock as he lacks his sense of paradox and his subtle alternations between ironical and serious statement". (28)

Mills also devotes one section in *Peacock: His Circle and His Age* (1969) to discuss the tone of Peacock's essay, and he uses a sharp metaphor especially to describe the end of it. According to him, "The sting of 'The Four Ages' is in its tail, its attack on contemporary poetry". (39)

Critics go on discussing Peacock's *The Four Ages* throughout time and Peacock's relevance goes beyond the Romantic times. That is to say, Peacock's *The Four Ages* not only has provoked Shelley's reply, but also a later essay, as Cuddon (1979) admits, when talking about *The Four Ages*: "Shelley took the matter seriously and replied with *Defence of Poetry* (1821); and in 1926 I. A. Richards published an equally serious refutation in *Science and Poetry*". (278)

Let us analyse, then, Peacock's essay in order to understand Shelley's response. First of all, Peacock uses in *The Four Ages* his knowledge of classical literature. He takes Hesiod's myth of the ages of the world in *Works and Days*, as the structural pattern for his essay. Hesiod's myth explains the degeneration of the world through its development from the Golden Age, to the Silver and the Bronze Ages and towards the Iron Age. This format helps Peacock to establish his criticism on poetry, as he marks the degradation of poetry from an excellent period towards its total degradation. His criticism is at times expanded to his opinion about contemporary society, pointing that the degradation of poetry runs parallel to the degradation of the man of each age.

Peacock's essay can easily be read in two parts. One part is devoted to classical poetry, and the other one is devoted to the modern age, that is the age in which we can situate Romantic poetry. He sets different levels to explain the development of classical poetry. Its beginnings are set in an Iron Age (its raw beginnings), and it develops through the Golden Age, the Silver Age and the Brass Age.<sup>2</sup> In the second part, to explain the development of modern poetry, a period he names "the Dark Ages", Peacock sets a similar pattern as classical poetry.

In the first part, Peacock starts his attack on poetry from the very beginning of his essay, when considering poetry as a commercial

1 Richards reflects about Peacock's idea about poetry and asserts that Peacock thinks that "future poetry is nil" (20), since, according to Peacock, contemporary poetry was mainly based in past times. This is, however, the only time that he questions Peacock's essay.

2 Notice how Peacock does not used the word *Bronze* as Hesiod but *Brass*, in order to give the impression of an Age in Literature, which is even worse than the Bronze Age of the World.

transaction in the Iron Age (491) or "Bardic Age" (494). According to him, the poetry of this age is also oral and "panegyric", and it is made out of rude songs by rude bards. The characteristic device of this poetry is the "tumid hyperbole" (491), which Peacock portrays in the following quotation, where he tries to describe ironically its content. The content of this poetry shows the exaggerated or "hyperbolic" qualities of heroes, and Peacock himself uses exaggeration to mock such poetry, in this way:

tell us how many battles such a one has fought, how many helmets he has cleft, how many breastplates he has pierced, how many widows he has made, how much land he has appropriated, how many houses he has demolished for other people, what a large one he has built for himself, how much gold he has stowed away in it, and how liberally and plentifully he pays, feeds, and intoxicates the divine and immortal bards, the sons of Jupiter, but for whose everlasting songs the names of heroes would perish. (491)

Peacock also tells us ironically how the poets of this Iron Age are. He states that poets are regarded in a divine way, but they can only be divine because the people of this age are sorts of brutes and they let themselves be convinced by these poets who are, according to him, bad poets. In this way, he is criticising society too, since he is calling them directly "brutes" and indirectly "ignorant people". According to him these poets are:

portions and emanations of divinity: building cities with a song, and leading brutes with a symphony: which are only metaphors for the faculty of leading multitudes by the nose. (492)

After the Iron Age the Golden Age comes, and poetry begins to be "retrospective". It is the age of Homer and, despite Peacock's assertion about poetry being perfect and "more an art" (492), he goes on with his negative tone, pointing out that in this age we can only find tradition "adorned and exaggerated" (492). After the Golden Age, the Silver Age or Virgilian Age comes, and this is a step towards the extinction of poetry. According to Peacock, the poetry of this age can be either imitative or original. To him, Virgil is an example of the imitative poetry and the original poetry is, using his words, "chiefly comic, didactic, or satiric: as in Menander, Aristophanes, Horace and Juvenal". (493). We can see here Peacock's devotion to satire and his admiration to authors such as Horace or Aristophanes, who will also influence his satiric novels.

Peacock also relates his criticism on poetry to a criticism on the reader of it, which is extended, again at this age, to society, maintaining the same ironic and negative tone from the beginning of the essay. He establishes the idea that this poetry is read or followed only because there are lazy readers that need some type of amusement. Thus, according to him, in this Silver Age it is evident that

poetry must either cease to be cultivated, or strike into a new

path [...] but there is always a multitude of listless idlers, yawning for amusement, and gaping for novelty; and the poet makes it his glory to be foremost among their purveyors. (493-4)

Finally, the Brass Age comes, which is also named the Nonnic Age by Peacock, since, according to him, Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* "is the best specimen of it" (494). In this Age, Peacock also uses his irony to describe the poetry of the age. According to him, this age pretends to show "a return to nature and revive the age of gold" (494), but Peacock's point of view is a different one. To him, poetry in this age is only a description of different things and the poet is somehow similar to the *hack writers*, as their kind of poetry can be written by anyone:

a verbose and minutely detailed description of thoughts, passions, actions, persons, and things, in that loose rambling style of verse, which anyone may write, *stands pede in uno*, at the rate of two hundred lines in an hour. (494)

Thus, according to his structural pattern poetry has degraded and the Iron Age is the first step towards the degradation of modern poetry, his contemporary time. In this age, Peacock locates the medieval romance and the chivalrous poetry. Then, the Golden Age comes, and he focuses the main writers of each age, giving us Shakespeare's as good example of golden poetry. To him the greatest of all poets is Milton, and that is why he stands alone, between the Golden and the Silver Ages. This Silver Age starts with Dryden, reaches its perfection with Pope and ends with Goldsmith, Collins and Gray, who we curiously see are the Pre-Romantic poets. After these authors, the Age of Brass comes, which is the Romantic Age, more or less Peacock's time. This age marks the total degradation of poetry, and gets Peacock's sharpest criticism. He uses harsh definitions to refer to the poetry of his time, admitting, for instance, that this poetry is "promiscuous rubbish" (496). He also points out, in a critical way, that the three best types of poetry that the inspiration at this age can create consist of three "ingredients", presenting us ironically a sort of possible recipe with a disastrous result. This is also a clear critique on the fashionable sentimental sensibility in literature at this time:

The highest inspirations of poetry are resolvable into three ingredients: the rant of unregulated passion, the whining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment: and can therefore serve only to ripen a splendid lunatic like Alexander, a puling driveller like Werther, or a morbid dreamer like Wordsworth. (496)

Peacock goes on as regards the poet<sup>3</sup> of the Romantic times. He maintains his tone of criticism and points out poets' exaggerated recurrence to the topic of the past times, and that's why Peacock calls the poet "semi-barbarian", because "the march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward". (496). Because of this, this poet

3 It is interesting to consider the fact that Peacock is criticising poetry and the poet while being a poet himself. In fact, Peacock starts his literary career writing poetry but he was not considered a good poet. That is the cause why he decides to change to prose, as Mulvihill's (1987) tells us: "Peacock had recognized that his response aesthetic and intellectual to such things as modern commerce and technology was more complex than conventional verse allowed him to express". (26-27)

can only write "empty aimless mockeries of intellectual exertion" (496).

Finally, Peacock dares to attack particular Romantic writers, and even critics or the reader. His attack on particular Romantic writers is very clear as regards the figure of Wordsworth, who is described by Peacock with irony as "the great leader of the returners to nature" (495). This attack is completed when using Wordsworth's ideas and language in an ironic way and in the negative context he has created in the essay, as in the following quotation:

Poetical genius is the first of all things, and we feel that we have more of it than any one ever had. The way to bring it to perfection is to cultivate poetical impressions exclusively. Poetical impressions can be received only among natural scenes: for all that is artificial is anti-poetical. Society is artificial, therefore we will live out of society. The mountains are natural, therefore we will live in the mountains. (495)

These ideas, according to Peacock, can only be appropriate of "rhymesters" or those "Lake poets" (495), presenting us a new hint of his criticism on Wordsworth. Besides, he ridicules even the critics of the Romantic times, above all, because of their pretension of admitting their knowledge about Romanticism as if they were "Olympic judges". Thus he calls them:

their Olympic judges, the magazine critics, who continue to debate and promulgate oracles about poetry, as if it were still what it was in the Homeric age. (497)

All these ideas are the causes that Peacock gives us to explain the degradation of poetry, especially of Romantic Poetry, which is parallel to the decline of its audience's intellectual capacity. Now, it is evident that we have reached the Brass Age. Using his words, the poetical audience will not only continually diminish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the comparison of intellectual acquirement. (497)

This attack or criticism on Romanticism and particularly on Romantic figures is also maintained in most of Peacock's novels and is clearly seen in *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), where we can find, among others, an ironic portrait of Coleridge through Mr. Flosky, of Shelley through Mr. Glowry and Scythrop, or of Byron through Mr. Cypress.

However we have to admit that despite this sort of hatred to Romantic poets and poetry, critics contemplate his admiration or respect towards Byron, apart from Shelley. For example, following Kjellin's (1974) words, "with the exception of Shelley, he only praises Byron of the other contemporary writers, and then, typically enough, *Don Juan*". (14). It is also important to mention Peacock's *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1827; 1860), not only as a proof of Peacock's knowledge about Shelley but also as another source of information about this Romantic writer and Romanticism.

In fact, as we maintain in this article, Peacock's relation to Shelley made possible Shelley's essay. We have already said that Peacock's attack against poetry and Romanticism in a negative and ironic way in *The Four Ages* was the cause of Shelley's answer through his *Defence* with a tone of elevation. If Peacock's attack is direct and strong, Shelley's *Defence* is not less vigorous, and that is why it is generically named a "defence". Shelley even is able to establish a sublime definition of poets, which is well-known by critics: "a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one" (500).

Following Peacock's essay, Shelley admits that there are different ages in poetry but he does not limit them as much as Peacock. Shelley focuses mainly on definitions of poetry, the poet and the poem, using Romantic images. We have to consider, as Shelley's himself sometimes admits ("But I digress", 504), that his essay is a digression on poetry and the poet, which does not either end. He promises a second and a third part that are not written.

First of all, Shelley relates the poet to the Aeolian lyre, a Romantic symbol and he defines poetry as "the expression of the imagination" (499), the faculty that some Romantic writers try to define. Apart from that, Shelley does not simply use imagination in his definitions of poetry. He praises imagination in poetry as a source or way of producing moral good, to which poetry also contributes. In that way, in the *Defence*

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. (503)

While Peacock criticises poetry as mere amusement, Shelley goes deeper and talks about poetry as delight, but also as the cause of morality. Shelley insists on the Romantic imagery and, following the romantic line that praises the return to nature, he resorts to some natural elements that he includes in his definition. This time, he talks about the process of creating poetry and admits that

A man cannot say "I will compose poetry". The greatest poet ever cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness. This power arises from within, [...] (511)

This is clearly an answer and an opposite opinion to Peacock's mocking assertion that any man is able to create poetry "*stands pede in uno*" (494). Shelley uses other images in order to defend and define poetry. He uses the mirror to assert that "poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted". (502). This magic image of the mirror takes him to describe poets in general and conclude his essay with a very different tone from Peacock's one, who insisted on the decline of poetry, the poet and even the audience. Thus, Shelley in a hopeful tone asserts that

poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the

mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; [...] Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (513)

To sum up, Peacock needs to be considered a relevant figure within Romanticism even though being outside the movement. His essay *The Four Ages of Poetry* presents a methodical criticism on poetry, especially hard on Romantic poetry, which is the main cause for Shelley's well-known *Defence of Poetry*. It is Peacock's accentuated attack what provoked Shelley's well-known exaltation of poetry and the poet. In this sense, Peacock should be taken from the margin to the centre, offering us new perspectives on Romantic poetry.

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