

Words for the Wind  
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“The song tells us of our old way of living,  
Of life in former times. Fragrance of florals,  
How things merely ended when they ended,  
Of beginning again into a sigh.”

—John Ashbery

Understanding of beauty leads to plenary happiness. Yet without cognition, any potential aesthetic experience cannot rise above mere observation—a memory or moment vanished, to neither joy nor escape, impossible. Surely thoughts would just flood, as surrounded as we are by beauty; the beauty of art, of enormity—a sunset spitting colors or a Sunday at the park, a slanted Pollack canvas or the memory of suspended affection: puppies and toddlers and the Andalusian moon, orange, in tears for a mirror. But none of those experiences could be truly beautiful without being allowed to, without meaning.

There is, however, one exception to the process, which comprises two variances of beauty separated from this superlative awareness. The first is a purity that transcends purpose; a phenomenon that it simply *is*—we are often aware of it, the tug of depth beyond explanation: when you feel infinities expanding within, like an indefatigable network, brought to where time’s limitations are laughable. It is an embodiment of perfection; it transcends empirical experience or arrival, and, like Aquinas’ Justice, it is both intrinsically good and incorruptibly superior, it runs the domain of insensible, impossible to imagine, something like the collective human spirit or some unseen universal good, its shooting-star ineffable.

The second variant form of the exception to perfect beauty is the equally-elusive-and-thereby-equally-unrealizable material of secondary presences, vital to the unknown familiar, the unbeckoned mundane, which derive from nature or slump man-made—beautiful in the same way a fallen angel is, darker than we think of beauty usually, imposed as an eerie perfection we are not supposed to notice, its beauty is only present in our ignorance of such. And how it occurs spontaneously, with unplanned approach, so that, if confronted at all, it is realized by no more than the immediacy of the senses.

From now on the relationship between actual beauty and the two variances will be mostly referred to as aesthetic judgment (intellective) and aesthetic belief (intuitive).

Meaning begins with a thought's reaction, which resides in memory. More important, a great deal of meaning is imagined, fictitious: created. Because thought is a form of conversation, a means of synthesizing a unified world—a world of both detached sensual inductions and certain preeminent realities: the sensate beside the empyreal...

True adepts of the lauding of and searching for beauty were the English Romantic poets. They sought mind and emotion equally. In this way, these poets occupied the role of philosopher as well. A unification of identities which was not the least bit strange; in fact, they took it as their duty, their responsibility—to them, a true poet should be part philosopher, should at least *try* to save mankind.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, often thought of as the most latently philosophical of the group, is not only among the brightest luminaries of English Romantic poetry but of everlasting poet, overhead the multitudes of brilliant poets—where there he oversees order above those god-and-goddess bards—Shelley wind rising perfection—and Gregory Corso calls him the only poet divine.

Agree with Corso or not, Shelley is at his lowliest the philosopher-poet's philosopher-poet. And though, like many of his contemporaries, his work is filled with a genius-poet's *rendition* of ontology, it is often difficult to fully assign any one school of philosophical thought to him (meaning, it is best to not think of him as philosopher, but poet with a philosophic mind and manner). Which is not to say that his philosophy does not inspire or captivate or shine—in fact, it does all three, and contains some great ideas.

More specifically, he shifts from a kind of empiricism/idealism to a unique humanism, though Shelley's true interest is clearly in the latter. His writing, whether prose or verse or the dramatic combining of the two, both explains and proves the importance of the poet and the poem—because poetry is a thing divine, responsible for “the moral improvement of man,” the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth (Shelley Defence 485, 484).

To be a poet, writes Shelley, is to apprehend the true and the beautiful. As such, he contains an excess of beauty. His language, the poem, alone can “redeem from decay the visitations of the divinity of man” (Shelley 1143).

Many of his poems achieve this, the provocation of that feeling, of being visited by one sent to redeem the divinity of man. This, again, has largely to do with his passion for philosophy, both the philosophy of his contemporaries—who literally surrounded him (e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and family)—and the more foundational classical thought; he translated a great deal of Plato, whose influence on Shelley's work is ubiquitous. It is from Plato's Symposium, in fact, which Shelley's *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (a poem tantamount to the examination of beauty), takes its name.

A brave man, Shelley, for, despite the animosity Plato cedes Socrates' depiction of the poets, that any bystander could explain the poems better than the authors themselves—a view grounded in the belief that poets “do not compose their poems with knowledge, but with some inborn talent and inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say,” a contention alternately affirmed and refuted in *In Defence of Poetry*— Shelley maintains a purview gladly inherited from and challenged by Plato's own (Plato 27).

His was a world carrying conflict and ideas at odds, a great example being the start of *In Defence of Poetry*, where Shelley demonstrates a Blakean tumult of contraries mid-progression similar also to the Platonic “Two Worlds” concept. The essay, a rebuke of T.L. Peacock's “half-serious treatise *The Four Ages of Poetry*,” devises a formal system from which Shelley abstracts, elaborates, and protects the role of the poem, the function of the poet, and the beauty within both (Cameron xxviii).

Intellect, to Shelley, is composed of “two classes of mental action: reason and imagination” (Shelley *Defence* 27). Reason in this case denotes “[T]he mind contemplating relations borne by one thought to another,” already begun, enumerative in this way, synthetic (Shelley *Defence* 27). Reason is matter to a form. The body to its soul.

Imagination, on the contrary, is the mind acting on those thoughts only observable to reason, “so as to color them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity” (Shelley *Defence* 482). It is a matter of creation versus replication, or, to wax Platonic, *reality* versus *reflection*.

First, the examination of reason, namely as it relates to various poems or prose pieces, with attention on the relationship between reason (which Shelley boldly presents as a privation of creativity in *Defence*, but more equivocally elsewhere) and the various concepts comprising it as an overall notion. After that, it's on to imagination.

To begin with, Shelley's narrator in *On Life* bemoans his perceived isolation of being, explaining that he "is one who is unable to refuse his assent to the conclusions of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived" (Shelley *Life* 219).

Fittingly—tellingly—the poem was inspired by a visit to Robert Southey, during which Shelley discovered notes Southey had penciled into a copy of Berkeley's *Treatise*, one of which struck him: "Mind cannot create, only perceive" (Cameron 513). The statement and the theme it engendered in *On Life* are in stark contrast to the lauds of imagination in *Defence* and *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, both of which are without the gloom of the *On Love* and *On Life* essays. In the latter, for example, the narrator attacks the study of wisdom itself, scoffing that "Philosophy ... has much work yet remaining, as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages," concluding with the claim that "Our life is thus an education of error," even going so far towards the end as to reduce himself into being merely "a grammatical device"—the letter "I" (Shelley *Life* 219-20).

Similarly, we have from the start of *On Love* a solipsist burning, a man, desolate, who "does not know the internal constitutions of other men," bitter with the realization that he will never know another human the way that he knows himself (Shelley *Love* 114). But this is absurd.

As selfish and lazy as it is absurd, but distinctly absurd in that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, explains, “understanding is not based on transposing oneself into another person, on one person’s immediate participation with another, [because] to understand what a person says is to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not get inside another person and relive his experiences” (Gadamer 385).

Similarly, consider Roger Scruton’s Wittgensteinian refutation of the Cartesian *Cogito* from an essay concerning the subject/object split: “No Language can refer to a sphere of merely private things, every language, even one that I invent for myself, must be such that others can learn it, too” (Scruton 48).

So we have a narrator who is altogether self-involved, the lorn and pitiful grump afflicted with skepticism—a symptom common to those too devout to reason. Notice, for example, that the poem begins with a row of anxious questioning: “What is love? Ask him who lives, what is life? ask him who adores, what is God?”(Shelley*Love*114). Slowly the poem descends into a (morbid) calm.

Whereas the narrator of *On Life* begins with an unfettered freeness, a sylvan mania, admiring the wonder and beauty of life, the creation of all (wondering how it could have been made), but is slowly enveloped by a self-minded thinking, the world of the senses, a materialist’s outlook—the lines somehow suddenly close, he wraps himself in his thoughts, begging, “What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will, and we employ words to express them ... How vain is it to think words can penetrate the mystery of our being! Rightly used they make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much. For what are we? Whence do we come? and whither do we go?” (Shelley *Life* 218). There are many more examples of this, too: Shelley eloquently articulating his

belief that language is ineffective. Compare this to the narrator of *On Love*, the latter with his “language misunderstood, like one in a distant land” (Shelley Love 114).

Few things could be more isolating than the loss of language. Language is the highest expression, the truest connection, and without it wavers a strange, gasping silence. A correlative absence as potent as nothingness. And Gadamer: “Language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it; and not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it” (Gadamer 440).

So the feeling pervades: Is man bound to secret living? A Cartesian seclusion easily avoidable. After all, one of Life's foolproof tricks is our utter, self-involved confusion. Each of us spends every waking moment with ourselves, a part of our thoughts and worries and insecurities, and this could certainly be construed as a confinement—made worse by that struggle for an answer: but each question's only answer is ten more sets of questions.

Some people exhaust themselves in this struggle for meaning, worse in that this confusion will overcome any efforts to untangle it. In fact, the very effort towards a solution renders us more clueless and befuddled and confused. Cavalier misfortune alone will strike naïveté too dumb for curiosity, causally negated by desultory heartbreak, delayed by tenuous hope and bad luck and pitiless foreknowledge—eventually *trying* to be dull, to look bored, because, blunted, there is less to give thought to. Easier yet is to call all of it apathy, settle into those shallows where “[e]ach is at once the center and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things

are contained” (Shelley *Life* 219). These are the components of that familiarity which is “at once so certain and so unfathomable” (Shelley *Life* 218).

We move from childhood into adulthood; and, difficulties arise, *eo ipso*—but if a person expels the imaginative faculty (which we live in as a child), each stage will get a bit smaller, its walls closer to shoulders with each step forward, so that, by the time that vernal fullness has vanished, in roiling loss of greatness, of beauty, thoughtless enough to wander into “feelings and then reasonings are the combined result of a multitude of entangled thoughts, and of a series of what are called impressions, planted by reiteration” (Shelley *Life* 220).

*In Defence of Poetry* provides another example of this unfortunate life progression, presenting first the child, whose each “inflection of tone and every gesture [bears] exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it,” (Shelley *Defence* 483).

The child is then contrasted with *the savage*, who understands his environment through immutable objects, each “plastic or pictorial imitation,” unaware that this hinders the advancement of the originality, the creativity, that actualizes the objects surrounding him (Shelley *Defence* 483). Instead, he uses a defeated language, waves arms, mutters the name of finitude. The artless savage is stand-in for the spirit of the multitudes too lazy or afraid to embrace creativity and poetry, a lesson not unlike that within the Allegory of the Cave. As seen in both Shelley’s savages and Plato’s prisoners, the cave-bound could not care less about a hunger for knowledge or its purifying fullness. And thus man becomes the object of his own doing—he subjugates and exploits himself (Shelley *Defence* 483).

Clearly, the two language-bereft narrators from *On Love* and *On Life* are cave-bound in this way, as well; only they contain something altogether more sinister than the stupidity and laziness of the savage or the prisoner; which appears to stem from their Cartesian outlook, their voice replaced with isolation, endangered by choice—to put it more bluntly, when the solipsist dies, the rest of us go with him.

The man spurs through self-consciousness into the “chasm of an insufficient void,” empty of poetics (Shelley *Love* 114). This form of interiority is unmitigated apathy, a symptom of selfishness, which can be seen as consequence of an allegiance to reason at the cost of imagination (Shelley *Love* 215). Shelley’s narrator then writhes through gorgeous phrases (e.g. “we are born into the world, and there is something within us which more and more thirsts after its likeness,” “a community with what we experience in ourselves”) which give view and full view to those gorgeous gifts, in tufts of language, embossing it first with resplendence, then a wall of shadows to add fright to his admonition: that if man does not embrace the beauty of life and love and nature, he will “become the living sepulcher of himself” (Shelley *Love* 116).

The gruesome lesson is simple: This man is no longer a part of true reality, having long ago removed himself. So the solution, it would appear, lies somewhere between the establishment of a self and the cultivation of that self’s expanding beyond itself.

Apropos of this lesson, let’s now leave the theoretical examination of reason, and focus on the ethical/practical examination imagination. I would like to start by suggesting that Shelley in *On Love* examines humanity in such an ambiguous way that it is at times more about searching for that solace in an ideal exchange, hidden somewhere. And with each expressive act we allow the inward movement out. Creation observed. Obverse to

the poem's interiority and self-occupation, the poem reveals just as much of the exteriority, the imagination. The poem, in this light, addresses also the essential mastering of that tricky balance between enhancing one's inner self with allowing the outer world entrance—thereby balancing the worlds of sense and universal. The imagination, therefore, is “the invisible influence, like an inconstant wind” (Shelley *Defence* 1143). A whip of breeze that serves as spirit to the Aeolian Harp.

With words for the wind.

Because language is music—song and hymn. Its words develop a form, a form completed by the subtleties of the speaker, the talker, the singer: a nervous quiver before a first kiss lilts melodious, a melody seeks a harmony—we harmonize, we bandage—groans and purrs and whimpers in nightmares, but we connect; sighs or grunts or unexplained chuckles, smiles too silent to ever be heard, but somehow heard, kept somehow, loud as icy rainfall, soft as meant kisses...

Whereas the solipsist's world shrinks infinitesimally, the humanist's world expands transfinitely. Thus, in keeping with the essay's move from isolated self to the achievement of plenary happiness, our definition and understanding of beauty must correspondingly grow.

Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* is all but a guidebook to beauty, as seen here in Shelley's ability to encapsulate Beauty as we shift to the poet. Viz.:

“But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and founders of civil society, and the inventors of the art of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the invisible world which is called religion” (Shelley *Defence* 1133).

To the poet, all of the highest-level categories of being, “language, colour, form, religious and civil habits of action ... are the instruments and materials [for his] poetry”; although poetry must also, like Wittgenstienian example of language and the world, serve as instrument and material for these ideals as well, “restricted to those arrangements of language” (Shelley *Defence* 1133).

Shelley dismantles language and social function, historical and moral and political purpose, in order to provide a clearer understanding of the poet, whose achievements are truth and beauty, whose language is divine (Shelley *Defence* 1133). Recall again the solipsistic figure, particularly his claim that “[e]ach is at once the center and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained” (Shelley *Life* 219); and compare this stricture to the following example’s openness: “[Poetry] is at once the center of the circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred ... it is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things ... it is the form and splendour of unfaded beauty” (Shelley *Defence* 1143).

Justly, the beauty described in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* surpasses even the boundless limits of language: “No voice from some sublimer world hath ever / To sage or poet these responses given”: and the stricture of religion: “the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven, / Remain records of their vain endeavor” (Shelley *Hymn* 229). Furthermore, beauty—intellectual beauty, that hugeness in the mind which is both “individual and universal, and stands in contrast to the beauty of the external world” (Cameron 515)—is the sole giver of “grace and truth to life’s unquiet dream” (Shelley *Hymn* 229).

With the previous quote in mind, consider Edmund Burke's synthesis of the beautiful and the sublime: "those things we call beautiful have smoothness, delicacy, softness of color, and elegance of movement. The sublime, on the other hand, comprehends the vast, the obscure, the powerful, the rugged, the difficult—attributes which produce in the spectator a kind of astonished wonder and even terror" (King 235).

Just as the concept of the sublime adds an element of fullness to the concept of Beauty, the interconnecting of reason and imagination serves to their being components of an entirety—namely, the intellective faculty—which functions to elevate our perception of Beauty, the understanding of which achieves a happiness or perfection, better known by Shelley as Poetry. Because: "Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change" (Shelley *Defence* 1144). At this point, it becomes about universality.

Cue: Immanuel Kant. via *the Critique of Judgment*. And particularly his take on the convergence of polarities, in this case empirical reason and a priori insight, as a means of achieving the end of universality—although he somehow ends up claiming that beauty is subjective, insofar as "the word 'beautiful' ... does not express a concept or a fact, but expresses the feeling of a subject," essentially doing the opposite in his attempt to prove that beauty exists in the subjective feeling, and not the object—a pursuit he soon abandons for the concept of the artistic genius (Seung 147).

Which connects easily to Shelley's all-knowing, Poet God, disseminator of truth and beauty. Kant devotes a good deal of the latter half of *the Critique* to the relationship between art and the genius—though, unlike Shelley, Kant asserts that it is experience

which allows for this, that experiences, “seen as the enduring residue of moments lived in their full immediacy, are the material artistic genius transforms into works of art”

(Marshall xiii).

According to Hans-George Gadamer, Kant is here asserting that “the principle within aesthetic judgment is an a priori effect of the beautiful located halfway between a mere sensory, empirical agreement in matters of taste and the rationalist universality of a rule” (Gadamer 38). But this neglects any ability to create or imagine.

Far clearer are Gadamer’s own critiques, which at once resemble and further Shelley’s perspective; viz.: “Our faculty of knowledge is a free play of the imagination and understanding, a subjective relationship that is altogether appropriate to knowledge and that exhibits the reason for the pleasure of the object” (Gadamer 38).

As might be expected, Plato’s notion of beauty involves more a process of imitation (*mimesis*), as achieved through a hierarchical scheme of ordering “in relation to a thing’s proximity to the realm of forms”; essentially, the copying of nature—itsself a copy, albeit a bolder, clear replica of what Plato refers to as “the True, the Good, and the Beautiful”—“therefore, a work of representation derives but is distanced from absolute existence: it is a suggestion, elicitation, evocation, shadowing...” (Minor 31).

In line with his theory of recollection as it relates to learning or knowing and his analogy of the line as it relates to perception or attunement, Plato maintains that “our souls had a vision of beauty before they entered the body,” the experience of beauty as we know it therefore amounting to our ability to open ourselves into that supply of prefigured beauty (Minor 33). “All this,” Plato explains, “was the plan for the god who is forever for the god who was sometime to be” (Plato 23).

Additionally, Plato believes that reality is complete—that there is nothing new to be added, only truths to find out—and as such can be remembered but not created: beauty, to him, will exist with or without us (Minor 33); the idea that the divine is reflected on this earth, and that “we love that reflection because of what it represents” (Minor 66).

Although, don't these expostulations seem to be missing crucial humanity? Surely these nomenclature-heavy abstractions and proofs and neologisms do not represent the highest form of Beauty. In other words, what is beauty without love of beauty—and what is beauty without Love? Because Love produces in a person an array of motivations, intrinsically wholesome thought sometimes playfully unreliable, which serve as a basis for meaning—love serves as a kind of spectrum on which we rate or separate the degrees and variances and similitudes of beauty and experience. But it is more than that; more than a means to particular ends. Beauty at its tamest is appreciation, the recognition of delight—it is fondness, care, and attentiveness; want for want and desire in need in purity—it is hunger of the mind, or appetite of the body through thought. The highest pinnacles of beauty are happiness and love.

Shelley covers the subject exhaustively. His humanism shows this best, for example: “[Love] is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything that exists” (Shelley *Love* 114). The achievement of this affection, this connecting with humanity is the superlative realization: “[Love] is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves,” a community

given, a correct refrain, not mimesis of the dancing men in *Defence*, but free-rising like the lyre—like the community within, where “there is a principle that acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony” (Shelley *Love* 113).

Note, in *Another Fragment to Music*, Shelley’s utilization of symmetry when using the aelion harp as metaphor, namely in the pairing of “ever-changing wind” to “ever-changing melody” (Shelley 483). Wind is to melody as understanding is to beauty, just as beauty is to happiness as melody is to harmony.

He here relies on the Sheppard Tone’s linger: the onslaught sung rising with its low note unbeheld—a cliff yet touched but in the stasis of ever-ascending melodies—and he offers *amor aeternus*, in gentle faux-rebuke of “the great sea of human right and wrong,” assuring us that *Love*, however misdirected, both “surpasses all that frail stuff which will be” and belongs to those “things which are immortal” (Shelley *Amor* 549). To love is to spread further the darkness from the light, to break the spell of Adam.

Though beauty occurs on its own, it also relies upon poetry, is bound to it in the same way the music within us is reliant upon instruments and words unsaid just waiting on our voice. It is not the case that: without Poetry, Beauty disappears. But that life without either would comprise absolute silence.

The solipsist, we have observed, harms himself and those around him, in his negating all but his own doubt. And while this doubt is a form of cognizance, it is not one which leads to understanding, perhaps even inuring a kind of anti-understanding. Similarly, without exteriority, the solipsist deals with only himself, thereby plugging his ears to the language of others, which hinders his ability to connect with other people—alone, almost nothingness. What good is beauty or happiness or love or poetry or even

existence in a world with but one person? What good is it to that person? He certainly cannot ascribe any real meaning to it. He cannot share it; and to share with others a meaningful experience is to become altogether more human, more connected to the whole. The highest form of Beauty, therefore, is the love which comes of humanism. And it is the understanding and achievement of this Beauty which results in plenary happiness.

Isn't it better to release your breath into the frosty air, as you open your eyes, as you sense that inward glow of warmth (like soft-warm bathtub water), and feel that surge of remembrances purposive, that catalogue of moments—your history, your past—which guides you toward wisdom and makes you unique; and more to then see it gleam in the eyes of another person, to hear the many moments shared in how a loved one calls your name, in the laughter you've made together? Too, isn't it true that you know how the future moves, glides quickly straight through us, with a lungful of the present, then a full-forward tremble into a past forged—that it does not move through you alone? That flood of ideas like no downpour yet known. Touching the mist of loss while struck by that deep hurt, that stomp of elation as you're dropped into huge ideas: made voiceless by the motion of images yet unspoken, made real as they materialize into language. Or the first moment of love, can't you return to your first moment of love? And the drawl of a soft forgotten voice, the taste of an apple and the stench of lost cities. As the hum spreads across budding light, at dawn or early morning, caught in plain velvet, in draws of indigo and crimson and light blue while, standing, you see the arcs and spires of some town in the awakening distance not worried by how sharp the rill cuts through horizon because isn't there always a sky right above? Perfect, monastic. Perfectly graceful.

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