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The long shadow of P.B. Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* on Anglo-American Modernist Manifestoes

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This paper aims at showing how Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* proved influential in 19th- and 20th-century aesthetics, despite Modernist criticisms of his poetic achievements as immature and overly sentimental. In particular, the article examines textual instances where James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Wallace Stevens's pronouncements of poetics seem not merely to respond to, but to have been shaped around and through Shelley's *Defense*.

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Shelley among (Anti)Romantic Moderns

…will they now play the hedgehog that, being received into the den, drave out his host? Or rather the vipers, that with their birth kill their parents?
Sir Philip Sidney, A Defense of Poetry

Modernism has traditionally been viewed as a reactionary, anti-Romantic movement, with T.S. Eliot often positioned as the primary architect of this perspective. This characterization appears plausible, especially in light of Eliot's critical appraisal of major Romantic poets in his 1932 lecture series *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism.* His portrayal of Shelley as a poet whose appeal is limited to adolescence is quite telling in this respect:

> The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence – as there is every reason why they should be. And an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence: for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity, but for how many does Shelley remain the companion of age? (Eliot 2015, 642)

The personal aversion in Eliot's words is unmistakable, and the informal lecture format may have allowed him to voice these idiosyncratic opinions more candidly, unbound by the restraint generally required by literary journals. Yet Eliot's anti-Romanticism runs deeper, rooted in his aesthetic worldview and his firm stance on self-expression (O'Neil 2007, 61) and his theoretical interest in impersonality (Ellmann 1987). For Eliot, the Romantic "I" represented a form of biographical narcissism, an urgent need to project personal experience onto the reader. This divergence from Romanticism was a consistent feature of his thought, as seen in major essays like "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Metaphysical Poets", alongside polemical critiques such as the one cited above.

Yet Eliot was only one among many reactionaries against Romanticism whose ideas helped shape early twentieth-century literature. His anti-Romanticism fits within a broader debate over the literary authority of nineteenth-century aesthetics, a debate that engaged many intellectual voices. Among them, Irving Babbitt's was particularly influential. Teaching at Harvard during Eliot's years as a student, Babbitt played a major role in disparaging nineteenth-century culture, portraying it as a refuge for "individual caprice" that, he argued, threatened to erode the authoritative values sustaining Western civilization (Levenson 1984, 30). His staunch anti-subjectivism was shaped by a profound anti-humanistic stance was later taken up by T. E. Hulme, whose description of Romanticism as "spilt religion" is frequently associated with Modernism's aesthetics of impersonality, although it bore, in its original exposition, a more belligerent tone of moral and political denunciation:

> By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism, your natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism. The concepts

> that are right and proper in their own sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table. Romanticism then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion. (Hulme 1994, 62)

However, these assumptions have long been under scrutiny. Since Frank Kermode's argument that Hulme's views on Modern poetry merely modernize the Symbolist aesthetic (Kermode 1957, 135) and Harold Bloom's efforts to elevate Yeatsian and Stevensian modernisms over Poundian and Eliotian standards (Bloom 1971), the anti-Romantic stance has begun to fade to a marginal position in modernist studies.

As a matter of fact, Romantic poetry was not neglected by all. As many recent studies highlight, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron continued to be held in high esteem by prominent literary figures. Virginia Woolf captures this affection in her 1927 review-essay "'Not One of Us'", in which she observes that nearly everyone maintains a vivid mental image of Shelley—an image shaped by, but not strictly bound to, his biography. Reflecting on Walter Peck's biography, she writes:

> There is an image of Shelley's personal appearance in everybody's picture gallery. [...] The picture is familiar enough; the only thing that changes is our attitude towards it. Shelley, excitable, uncompromising, atheistical, throwing his pamphlets into the sea in the belief that he is going to reform the world, has become a figure which is half heroic and wholly delightful. (Woolf 1994, 466)

Shelley, in this sense, metamorphoses into the quintessential poetical figure, embodying the tragic destiny of the doomed artist. This notion haunted numerous important works of the era, including Proust's *Recherche*, where we see it reflected in Marcel; Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with Stephen Dedalus; and, in a less direct way, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the character Septimus Warren Smith is shaped by this tragic sensibility. Septimus, whose suffering in the war deepened his adolescent, Romantic longing to transcend the limitations of his lower-middle-class life, reflects this archetype in a unique way. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Shelley appears almost as a tutelary deity, linked to loss and yearning; this presence begins with the story's original form, a short story in which Clarissa Dalloway recalls lines from Shelley's *Adonais* to mourn a friend who died in the war.

> 'From the contagion of the world's slow stain,' thought Clarissa holding her arm stiff, for there are moments when it seems utterly futile (the glove was drawn off leaving her arm flecked with powder) – simply one doesn't believe, thought Clarissa, any more in God. (Woolf 1989, 158)

Shelley was alive, but not only as a simulacrum to be borrowed and refashioned as a model for characters or a ghostly voice to be sawed to the remembrance of a dead friend. Despite Hulme's, and Pound's, and Eliot's disdain, Shelley did in fact expound a viable poetics, whose echoes resound in some unsuspecting authors. As a matter of fact, while it could be very easy to spot Shelleyan echoes in W.B. Yeats poetry after his numerous essays on him – like the insightful "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900) – it proves more challenging to investigate some other places, where Shelley's ideas might have germinated. This exploration would encompass not his poetics proper, but more specifically his general structuring tenets as he declared them in the very influential *Defense of Poetry* (1821).

Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* proved a milestone in 19th- and 20th-century aesthetics, despite Modernist criticisms of his poetic achievements as immature and overly sentimental. Beyond the specific messages it conveys, Shelley's *Defense* stands among the most influential works on the nature of poetry. Or rather, as Shelley himself argued when cautioning against confining poetry to verse — following Wordsworth's famous claims in the 1802 *Preface* to the *Lyrical Ballads* — it addresses the nature of literature as a whole. With its layered arguments, the *Defense* simultaneously continues classical, Renaissance, and contemporary reflections on poetic art. The presence of Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Sidney, and Wordsworth is as vivid within it as that of Peacock, who directly inspired Shelley's composition of the treatise (Rognoni 2018, 1224).

After Shelley's death, the *Defense* continued to shape new literary forms, and even T. S. Eliot—one of its supposed fiercest detractors—was not entirely immune to its influence (Bornstein 1976; O'Neill 2007). The *Defense*'s pervasiveness is hard to ignore, considering that Benedetto Croce, when invited to deliver a lecture at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, in 1933—almost concurrently with Eliot's disparaging remarks in *The Use of Poetry*—could not resist its force and used it as a foundation for a learned exploration of the genre of "defenses of poetry" (Croce 1990). Nonetheless, Shelley's emphasis on "titanism" and hero worship (Baker 1984, 111) eventually attracted criticism from anti-Romantics, who were wary of what they perceived as narcissistic, self-aggrandizing notions of the subject and unbridled emotion in poetry's creative process.

In this context, three examples of Modernist authors—Joyce, Woolf, and Stevens—illustrate the creative possibilities Shelley's *Defense* offered without requiring the polemic stance of figures like Eliot or the enthusiastic endorsement of Yeats. Rather than approaching Shelley as either advocates or adversaries, they examined his literary and aesthetic legacy with the freedom typical of their approach to literary tradition.

Joyce's fading coal

James Joyce is not known primarily for traditional literary criticism; instead, he embedded critical insights directly within his works, creating a self-contained form of "contaminated" criticism where art and critique coexist. This approach appears in the aesthetic system he presents at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the elaborate, interpretive theory of Shakespeare's life and works in *Ulysses*. While Joyce's critical writing began early, it wasn't until 1899 that he found a mature subject in drama. This is captured in his essay "Drama and Life", his most overt declaration of an artistic credo, which argues that literature should "joyfully affirm the human spirit" by piercing through superficial hypocrisy, acknowledging the raw body, and approaching the passions with an "indifferent sympathy" rather than didactic partisanship (Mason and Ellmann 1986, 8). Through this framework, Joyce urges his Irish contemporaries to reject provincialism and embrace a European perspective, demanding an "Attic form" to elevate Irish passion beyond mere nationalism:

> He tells his compatriots that they must cease to be provincial and folklorists and mere Irish, that they must accept Europe; he demands that Attic form be imposed on Irish passion; he composes a secular aesthetic to override the limits of Christian art; he declares that literature is the joyful affirmation of the human spirit, but that it can be so only if the writer breaks through hypocrisy, recognizes the brute body, maintains an 'indifferent sympathy' (instead of a didactic partisanship) towards the

> play of the passions he describes, and moves towards the lowlanders like a gallant stag" (Mason and Ellmann 1986, 8)

In "Drama and Life", an essay that later reappears in *Stephen Hero* as a piece written by Stephen Dedalus, Joyce blurs the boundary between his own views and those of his protagonist. Stephen's call for Irish literature to evolve by discarding provincial elements and embracing secular aesthetics represents Joyce's personal stance. His brother Stanislaus saw "Drama and Life" as Joyce's "struggle to impose the elegance of thought on the hopeless distortions of life" (Joyce 1958, 168).

In the essay "James Clarence Mangan", first read to the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin, Joyce criticizes the limiting dichotomy between classical and romantic schools, which he saw as fundamentally "constant states of mind", (Joyce 2000, 53)[1] rather than the progressive development that conventional criticism proposed. He cautions against the "impatient temper"[2] of Romanticism, which, unable to find its ideals in the real world, conjures them in insubstantial symbols, only to later abandon them as "shadows" that obscure rather than illuminate reality. In Joyce's view, this impulsive nature undermines Romanticism, which too often fails to ground its ideals in tangible meaning:

> The romantic school is often and grievously misinterpreted, not more by others than by its own, for that impatient temper which, as it could see no fit abode here for its ideals, chose to behold them under insensible figures, comes at times to regard them as feeble shadows moving aimlessly about the light, obscuring it; and the same temper which assuredly has not grown more patient, exclaims that the light is changed to worse than shadows, to darkness even, by any method which bends upon these present things and so works upon them and fashions them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning, which is still unuttered. (Joyce 2000, 53)[3]

One of Joyce's key points in the essay on Mangan is his assertion that verse is not essential to poetry, following Shelley's lead that "the distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error", since "the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy" (Shelley 2002, 514). Instead, he argues that true poetry transcends its medium of expression, with literature occupying a vast domain between ephemeral writing and true poetry. In this framework, verse alone cannot guarantee artistic depth; instead, literature in any form must seek out the "rhythmic expression of emotion". Joyce was highly selective in applying this criterion, suggesting that much of Wordsworth's work, and nearly all of Baudelaire's, is "merely literature in verse", falling short of true poetic achievement.

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[1] The passage appears thus in *Stephen Hero*: "Classicism is not the manner of any fixed age or of any fixed country; it is a constant state of the artistic mind" (Joyce 1944, 65-66).

[2] "The romantic temper, so often and so grievously misinterpreted and not more by others than by its own, is an insecure, unsatisfied, impatient temper which sees no fit abode here for its ideals and chooses therefore to behold them under insensible figures. As a result of this choice it comes to disregard certain limitations. It figures are blown to wild adventures, lacking the gravity of solid bodies, and the mind that has conceived them ends by disowning them" (Joyce 1944, 66).

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> Finally, it must be asked concerning evert artist how he is in relation to the highest knowledge and to those laws which do not take holiday because men and times forget them. This is not to look for a message but to approach the temper which has made the work, an old woman praying, or a young a man fastening his shoe, and to see what is there well done and how it signifies. A song by Shakespeare or Verlaine, which seems as free and living and as remote from any conscious purpose as rain that falls in a garden or the lights of evening, is discovered to be the rhythmic speech of an emotion otherwise incommunicable, at least so fitly. But to approach the temper which has made art is an act of reverence and many conventions must be first put off, for certainly the inmost region will never yield to one who is enmeshed with profanities. (Joyce 2000, 54)[4]

This argument reflects a broader perspective that Joyce introduced into discussions of art, literature, and criticism, specifically questioning the conventional alignment of verse with poetry and urging a re-evaluation of what qualifies as poetic expression.

In his critical reflections, Joyce also addresses the life of Mangan, marked by alcoholism and drug use, which exemplifies for Joyce the pitfalls of an artistic temperament that lacks a cohesive tradition. Mangan's art, though tinged by the opiate-fueled melancholia associated with the *poète maudit*, achieves beauty because of the deeply imaginative personality that Mangan brought to his work. The idea that an author's life could extinguish his whole significance is predictably discussed in *Ulysses*'s most directly erudite episode, Scylla and Charybdis, when George Russel affirms:

> All these questions are purely academic, Russel oracled out of his shadow. I mean, whether Hamlet is Shakespeare or James I or Essex. Clergymen's discussions of the historicity of Jesus. Art had to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring. The painting of Gustave Moreau is the painting of ideas. The deepest poetry of Shelley, the words of Hamlet bring our mind into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas. All the rest is speculation of schoolboys for schoolboys. (Joyce 2022, 360).

Without falling into the trap of otiose schoolboy parlance, Joyce seems able, although *Mangan* is one of his earliest pronouncements on art and, more specifically, on literary art, to transcend life and arrive at something more. The core of Joyce's appraisal of Mangan arrives when he argues about Mangan's relation with the past. Writing without a literary heritage to guide him and for a public focused on contemporary issues, Mangan seemed to rely on a sort of innate force of imagination, which Joyce instinctively connects with Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* by resorting to the image of the fading coal:

> Mangan, it must be remembered, wrote with no native literary tradition to guide him, and for a public which cared for matters of the day, and for poetry only so far as it might illustrate these. [...] But the best of what he has written makes it appeal surely, because it was conceived by the imagination which he called, I think, the mother of things, whose dreams are we, who imagineth us to herself, and to

[4] "The critic is he who is able, by means of the signs which the artist affords, to approach the temper which has made the work and to see what is well done therein and what it signifies. For him a song by Shakespeare which seems so free and living, as remote from any conscious purpose as rain that falls in a garden or as the lights of evening, discovers itself as the rhythmic speech of an emotion otherwise incommunicable, or at least not so fitly. But to approach the temper which has made art is an act of reverence before the performance of which many conventions must be first put off for certainly that inmost region will never yield his secret to one who is enmeshed with profanities" (Joyce 1944, 66).

> ourselves, and imagieth herself in us – the power before whose breath the mind in creation is (to use Shelley's image) as a fading coal." (Joyce 2000, 56-57)

By virtue of this fact, Joyce finds in Mangan's work a powerful vision, one that "remembers wrong and suffering" and evokes a singular, imaginative beauty that emerges from profound hardship.

Beyond his critiques of Romanticism, Joyce's ideas about poetry extended to a conception of art as a "revolt against artifice", even against reality itself. He insists that poetry's fantastic elements—often dismissed by those "who have lost the simple intuitions" marking reality—are instead marks of a deep intuition about the human condition. Rather than aligning with historical or societal narratives, poetry functions in a realm outside of history's fables, finding meaning in "every time less than the pulsation of an artery" (Joyce 2000, 59). This aspect of Joyce's vision reveals a commitment to seeing beauty and truth as transformative forces. This perspective leads Joyce to a broader reflection on artistic purpose: poetry, he argues, is the "rhythmic speech of an emotion otherwise incommunicable", offering insights beyond conscious intention and embodying what is otherwise untranslatable in human experience. This view culminates in his depiction of the artist as a mediator, "standing between the world of experience and the world of dreams" (Joyce 1944, 82). Such a position demands that the artist look beyond personal prejudices or societal constraints, thereby realizing a work that resonates with the "splendour of truth" as Joyce saw it.

In his critique of Mangan and his explorations of the classical versus romantic debate, Joyce begins to carve out a secular aesthetic that rejects simplistic nationalism in favour of a more rigorous, imaginative truth. This commitment to uncovering beauty in truth and vice versa constitutes the foundation of Joyce's transformative vision for Irish literature and beyond, challenging his contemporaries to reconsider the purpose and potential of art. Through these early essays and reflections, Joyce lays the groundwork for a modernist aesthetic that defies categorization, emphasizing an artistic integrity that remains true to the emotional and imaginative richness of human experience.

Woolf's young poets

Virginia Woolf's *Letter to a Young Poet* offers a nuanced critique of contemporary poetry, particularly engaging with the work of John Lehmann. This letter was part of the Hogarth Letters series, a cultural dialogue that John Lehman devised while working as a manager at the Hogarth Press. The list of contributors included voices like E.M. Forster, Raymond Mortimer and Rebecca West, who covered a range of literary and social topics. Lehmann encouraged Woolf's involvement because he thought her thoughts on poetry—rooted in a synthesis of prose's swiftness and poetry's intensity—would add a significant voice to the series. In her open letter, Woolf reflects on the poetry of Lehmann, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis, probing broader questions about poetry's form, purpose, and relevance in the modern world. Woolf's letter responds directly to an earlier essay by her nephew, Julian Bell, titled "The Progress of Poetry: A Letter to a Contemporary", published in *The Cambridge Review* in 1930 and dedicated to Lehmann. This essayistic dialogue recalls the dynamic exchange between Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* and Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry*. Here,

Woolf positions herself as an outsider to the poetic establishment—a female critic who, despite never having published poetry, possesses deep familiarity with the form.[5]

Woolf started to share her views on poerty during the years of WWI, when she would openly dismiss the wave of poetry written by young men in the trenches. She coined the term "irreticent" to describe what she saw as an excessive emotional outpouring, facilitated by the constraints of rhyme and meter. As she put it:

> Poetry is a much safer refuge than prose. A large number of the young men who left behind them enough verse to fill a little book before they were killed evidently wrote poetry because it allowed them to express their feelings without a sense of irreticence. This rhyme, this metre, these old poetical phrases, serve as a mask behind which the writer dares say something that he would blush to say with the infection of everyday speech in prose. (Woolf 1988, 73)

By the time Woolf engaged in the dialogue with Lehmann and Bell, her views on poetry had shifted. Though she still preferred the narrative flexibility of the novel, she began to acknowledge poetry's potential to engage with the complexities of the modern world. In her letter, she critiques the rigid neoclassicism popular among poets of the Thirties, advocating instead for a more emotionally resonant and adaptable poetic form. Despite her evolving views, Woolf retained a certain skepticism about poetry's limitations, echoing earlier prejudices that saw it as a youthful or escapist endeavor. By 1932, she redirected her critique from the War Poets to the poets of the Thirties, with whom she had a more ambivalent relationship (Sullam 2016, 175).

In "The Progress of Poetry", Bell aimed to avoid both "Georgian sentimentality" and "Eliotian obscurity", striving for "workmanlike, impersonal verse on the natural world". He valued metrical regularity and clarity, celebrating a "neo-classical" style marked by "extreme metrical strictness" and a "carefully controlled formal design". For Bell, the ideal poet was "clear, simple, and forcible in expression, plain, precise and appropriate in our language, [and] accurate and polished in our metres" (Bell 1930, 321–322). His emphasis on clarity and intellectual rigor reflects a deep adherence to the ideals of propriety, qualities he believed were lacking in modern verse (Kopley 2021, 228).

Woolf, by contrast, rejects this rigid formalism. She advocates for a poetic voice that is alive, evolving, and engaged with the messiness of the real world. While Bell and Lehmann's neoclassicism reflects a nostalgic yearning for the predictability of polished form, Woolf calls instead for poetry that breathes with the vitality of the past without merely imitating it. As she writes:

> Never think yourself singular, never think your own case much harder than other people's. […] They dress themselves up. They act their parts. One leads; the other follows. One is romantic, the other realist. One is advanced, the other out of date […] Think of yourself rather as something much humbler and less spectacular, but to my mind, far more interesting—a poet in whom live all the poets of the past, from whom all poets in time to come will spring. You have a touch of Chaucer in

[5] Emily Kopley, in *Virginia Woolf and Poetry* (2021), examines Woolf's nuanced relationship with poetry and the novel, highlighting a tension Woolf perceived between the two genres, often framed through binaries like "masculine and feminine" or "old and new". Kopley argues that while Woolf favored the novel for its narrative freedom, her prose nonetheless incorporated poetic techniques such as lyrical expression and rhythm, reflecting a deep engagement with the poetic form despite her alignment with the novel's potential.

> you, and something of Shakespeare; Dryden, Pope, Tennyson—to mention only the respectable among your ancestors—stir in your blood and sometimes move your pen a little to the right or to the left. In short you are an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character. (Woolf 2011, 308–309)

Moreover, her nephew and Lehman's classical views might have seemed to her nothing but a faint reproduction of the very controversial *rappel à l'ordre* predicated in the first decades of the 20th century by avant-gardist poetics such as T. E. Hulme and, also, T. S. Eliot's. Hulme, in particular, saw classicism as a sort of antidote against romanticism's pernicious solipsistic megalomaniac cult of the self, which Woolf would have appreciated in spirit, but most certainly not in its innate narrowminded conservativism (Hadjiyiannis 2013).

In the *Letter*, she presents herself as a sort of spokesperson for the category of "prose writers" (Woolf 2011, 308), which despite the very assuaging tone is evidently contrasted to the more religiously inspired group of the poets. Woolf's positions in the letter reflect her character-building in *The Waves*, the novel she was writing while collecting these insights on the art of poetry. Romantic poetry frequently echoes throughout the novel, and some characters seem to cherish a special poetic double.[6] Louis, the Australian-born character destined to become a businessman, for his part, cherishes the image of Shelley — a tender devotion that culminates in the novel's second half. While celebrating his success in business, he reveals a fatal reliance on Shelley's poetry.

> But I still return, I still come back to my attic, hang up my hat and resume in solitude that curious attempt which I have made since I brought down my fist on my master's grained oak door. I open a little book. I read one poem. One poem is enough [...]
>
> O western wind, when wilt thou blow,
> That the small rain down can rain?
>
> 'Life has been a terrible affair for me. I am like some vast sucker, some glutinous, some adhesive, some insatiable mouth. I have known little natural happiness, though I chose my mistress in order that, with her cockney accent, she might make me feel at my ease. (Woolf 2004, 133-134)

Louis's approach to life, although at its most prosaic, is still able to retain a poetic allure, and grants him the possibility to achieve something that Woolf would predicate in her *Letter*: i.e. "to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes you way fearlessly" (Woolf 2011, 316).[7] This absorption resonates with the imperative of saturation that Woolf

[6] Bernard, whose 'role' in the novel is to embody the storyteller — "I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids" (Woolf 2004, 17) — often associates his drive towards storytelling with Byron (52, 55, 57). Neville, by contrast, is more of a reflective sage and appears drawn to Wordsworth. He recalls an image of an apple tree that "became fixed in the sky" (13), a memory linked to his experience of receiving news of a suicide. This merging of different planes of experience, along with the theme of loss, clearly resonates with Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, especially its mourning of the vanishing "visionary gleam" (ll. 51–57). This memory is significantly tied to an autobiographical realm, one that Woolf will explore some years later in n"A Sketch of the Past" (1939).

[7] This peculiar and uncanny mix of sublimity and vulgarity can be connected to T. S. Eliot's poetry, particularly to certain passages of *The Waste Land*, which Woolf helped typeset for publication in 1922.

confided to her diary in 1928, when envisaged her prose for the *Waves* as the result of the elimination of "all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes" (Woolf 1980, 209).

In the *Letter* Woolf touches on very crucial issues by way of comparison with the Romantic tradition. For instance, when describing the idea of self that emerges from the writing of her young contemporary poets, who in her opinion are self-absorbed, unlike the Romantics:

> But what does one mean by 'oneself'? Not the self that Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley have described – not the self that loves a woman, or that hates a tyrant, or that broods over the mystery of the world. Mo, the self that you are engaged in describing is shut from all that. It is a self which is alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn. (Woolf 2011, 313)

In addition to her reflections on the self, the Romantic serve Woolf also to address the issue of tradition. While discussing Lehmann's assumptions about poetic lineage and legacy, she acknowledges the presence of past poets in Lehmann's work, but in doing so, she discourages what she calls the "necrophily" that stifles poetic evolution. In contrast to Bell's rigid neoclassicism, Woolf's vision allows for the spirit of past poets to animate but not dominate the present.

> Keats is dead, Shelley is dead, Byron is dead. But it is late: necrophily induces slumber; the old gentlemen have fallen asleep over their classics, and if what I am about to say takes a sanguine tone—*and for my part I do not believe in poets dying*; Keats, Shelley, Byron are alive here in this room in you and you and you and you—I can take comfort from the thought that my hoping will not disturb their snoring (Woolf 2011, 314-315, italics mine).

Ultimately, Woolf's *Letter* encourages Lehmann to engage with poetry's traditions without becoming subservient to them. In Woolf's view, the poet should live in the lineage of "Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Tennyson" without dressing up as Guy Fawkes, blindly imitating or simply rebelling. Rather, she insists on poetry that addresses the real world in all its complexity and vitality. Woolf saw the greatest challenge for contemporary poets in their tendency to integrate the real world with too much rigidity or realism, which reduced the power of the poetic form. Her letter thus becomes a rallying cry for poetic integrity, encouraging Lehmann and his contemporaries to reach beyond what was "literal-minded" and cultivate a nuanced balance between tradition and innovation.

Stevens's mystical marriage

Among the texts here scrutinised as responses to Shelley's *Defense*, Wallace Stevens *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction* (1942) is unquestionably the most sustained and experimental. First of all, it is a poem, a 659 blank verse one to be specific, composed of a dedication and three symmetrical sections each composed of 10 subsections of groups of seven triplets. In compliance with the equation between verse and prose predicated in the *Defense* and subsequently adopted by Joyce, Stevens is apparently using verse as

This equation, though perhaps simplistic, could potentially amount to a direct challenge to Eliot's anti-Romanticism. As there is no space here for a detailed analysis, I leave this suggestion for future investigation. For an initial scrutiny of Shelley's presence in the novel see (McGavran 1983).

a sort of vehicle for an anti-conventional declaration of poetics, which instead of rigorously illustrated paragraphs uses a long series of lyrical, meditative and narrative episodes told in verse.

The very phrase "supreme fiction" already appeared in a previous poem Stevens collected in his *Harmonium*, entitled *A High Tone Christian Woman*. In it the poets wrought a sort of subtle apology for hedonism against the views of the eponymous old sanctimonious woman. His formulation is clear, although not straightforward:

> Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven.
> [...] Allow,
> Therefore, that in the planetary scene
> Your disaffected flagellants, [...]
> May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
> A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
> This will make widows wince. But fictive things
> Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince. (Stevens 1997, 47)

Stevens rehabilitees fiction from the atavistic puritanical censure, and elevates it as being a supreme endeavour of the individual, although Stevens is swift in de-sanctifying this movement by labelling it as a "jovial hullabaloo", a formulation that faintly echoes Shelley's view of poetry as being "ever accompanied with pleasure" (Shelley 2002, 516). The very idea of defining poetry through poetry situates Steven's attempt into a recognisably romantic tradition, including famous Wordsworthian and Keatsian "sonnets on the sonnet". In addition to that, the decision of interspersing reflection on poetry inside poetical compositions might also resonate with Stevens's notorious discomfort at self-explanation of his own art:

> A long time ago I made up my mind not to explain things, because most people have so little appreciation of poetry that once a poem has been explained it has been destroyed : that is to say, they are no longer able to seize the poem. Moreover, even in a case like your own, or in the case of any critic, I think that the critic is under obligation to base his remarks on what he has before him. It is not a question of what an author meant to say hut of what he has said. In the case of a competent critic the author may well have a great deal to find out about himself and his work. This goes to the extent of saying that it would be legitimate for a critic to make statements respecting the purpose of an author's work that were altogether contrary to the intentions of the author. (Stevens 1966, 346)

Instead of a manifesto, he permeated his poetical output with metaliterary insertions, resulting in a rhapsodic poetics that never resolved in a coherent set of rules. In this sense, the title of the poem is telling, as the noun *Notes* clearly points to such a desultoriness. In a sense, the poem could actually to be considered a collection of minutes about specific aspects of the poetic world, and in this respect it can be fruitfully be read alongside Stevens's *Adagia*, the short annotations and aphorisms he collected in notebooks from 1930 to 1954 (Fusini 1987, 10).

In the first section of the *Notes* readers are made acquainted with the first *persona* of the poem, the "ephebe". Deciding to open the poem with a not yet mature character is a key fact, one that puts Stevens in direct dialogue with Woolf's young poet, and Joyce

acerbic *poète maudit*. Among the predications addressed to this ephebe is that of returning to an original state of ignorance,[8]

> You must become an ignorant man again
> And see tghe sun again with an ignorant eye
> And see it clearly in the idea of it. (Stevens 1997, 329)

This process of regression to a state of 'blissful' illiteracy can be seen as a most clear statement whose theoretical core is that of the influence of the past. In this respect Stevens was not a poet who would willingly and freely speak of the influence that past authors had on his own poetical practice. For instance, in January 1948 he confided to J. Rodríguez Feo that his state of mind "about poetry" made him "very susceptible and that is a danger in the sense that it would be so easy for me to pick up something unconsciously. In order not to run that danger I don't read other peoples' poetry at all" (Stevens 1966, 575). Forced to state the obvious, he would admit to Bernard Heringman in July 1955 that he, too, came down from the past, yet he claimed that such a past "is my own and not something marked Coleridge, Wordsworth" (Stevens 1966, 875). Despite these pronouncements, though, he had the previous January adopted an irenic disposition to influence, that read as follows:

> Why do poets in particular resent the attribution of the influence of other poets? The customary answer to this is that it gives them the appearance of being second-hand. That may be one of the aspects of what seems to me to be the true answer. It seems to me that the true answer is that with a true poet his poetry is the same thing as his vital self. It is not possible for anyone else to touch it. (Stevens 1966, 825)

This very matter-of-fact statement can be seen in action in *Notes*, especially in the second section, stanzas VI, VII and VIII. P.B. Shelley makes his appearance through two of his most famous poems, namely "Ode to the West Wind" and "Ozymandias". The first poem echoes in the witty neologism "bethou". This verb, possessing the value of the French *tutoyer* (Bacigalupo 2015, 1191), is thrown from the sublime setting of the original "Be thou me, impetuous one!" (Shelley 2002, 300) to the more bathetic scenery of a parliament of sparrows. The reworking of Ozymandias is far more orginal, as it entails a rewriting of the story of the ancient king via the creation of the character of Nanzia Nunzio, a faint echo of the Biblical bride that is depicted as about to wed Ozymandias, who is easy to be interpreted as an allegory of the very idea of literary tradition. Nanzia Nunzio symbolizes a poetic ideal confronting the ancient, steadfast image of Ozymandias. Wallace Stevens presents Nanzia as a figure on a journey of purification, a "vestal long-prepared" (Stevens 1997, 342) who, much like the Biblical bride, embodies mutability. Both Nanzia and Ozymandias belong to what Stevens calls the "reality-imagination complex" (Stevens 1966, 792), where the themes of permanence and transformation converge. Nanzia Nunzio becomes Stevens's translation of a symbolic bride, while Ozymandias, who stands rooted in the desert, represents the immovable ancient tradition that must be approached, even confronted, by the ephebe (or poetic newcomer) through symbolic shedding of elaborate diction. In her ritualistic approach to Ozymandias, Nanzia removes her necklace and belt, divesting herself "more nakedly / Than nakedness", requesting the prospective husband to

[8] This admonition echoes almost verbatim in the *adagium* "The poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man" (Stevens 1997, 917).

> Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
> In its own only precious ornament.
> Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal. (Stevens 1997, 342)

The scene in which Nanzia Nunzio meets Ozymandias can be understood as an expression of Stevens's evolving relationship with Romantic ideals. Stevens's poetry often contends with Romanticism in both its "pejorative sense" and its essential, vital quality. Here, Nanzia's shedding of jewellery and adornment is a ritual that echoes Stevens's own views about the influence of the past in a manner significantly different from the one he articulated while writing one of his major essays, "Imagination as Value" (1949) where he maintained that

> We must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. (Stevens 1997, 727–728)

If we were to follow this argumentative stance, we could see the Shelleyian echoes as mere parodic traps for the reader. Yet in the essay Stevens is following a strict reasoning that started form Pascal to get to a contemporary debate about the faculty of imagination between philosopher Ernst Cassirer and some of his detractors. Stevens, in the essayistic discourse, seems more prone to discard of the romantic, while in his poem he continues toward a third section which is yet another hedonistical re-statement that echoes Shelley's defense as the aforementioned *A High Tone Christian Woman*. Thus the confrontation between Nanzia Nunzio and Ozymandias should be read as a dramatization of the need for poets to engage directly with life, stripping away artifice in the pursuit of authentic, "pure" romantic expression. As Stevens stated in his *Adagia*, "The real is only the base. But is the base" (Stevens 1997, 917), illustrating his view that poetry must be firmly rooted in reality even as it elevates the mundane, Nanzia's final plea to be "clothed entire in the final filament" of transcendent love and understanding highlights a key tenet of Stevens's poetic mission: to affirm poetry's power to bring forth an idealized reality, where the imaginative force of the "new romantic" remains undiluted by superficial embellishments or empty tradition.[9]

For Stevens, this task is inseparable from the role of imagination in transforming reality, leading to his assertion in *Adagia*: "The imagination is the romantic" (Stevens 1997, 903). Through lines like "Poetry increases the feeling for reality" (919), he reinforces that poetry should ground its vision in life and not stray from it. Literature, he suggests, mirrors the severity of life itself; "As life grows more terrible, its literature grows more terrible" (901). However, without the romantic's imaginative spark, poetry risks becoming detached or disingenuous, and thus Stevens decrees that "A dead romantic is a falsification" (917).

[9] In "Sailing after Lunch" (1935), Stevens had elaborated that the task of the poet is to "keep the romantic pure" by discarding elements that have grown stale and renewing the essential sense of discovery (as he confessed in a letter to R. Lane Latimer in 1935, Stevens 1966, 277). The lines of the poem do indeed sound as a gentle admonishment: "The romantic should be here / The romantic should be there / It ought to be everywhere" (99). With his notorious facetiousness, though, Stevens glosses these thoughts with an unsettling close that recites "But the romantic should never stay".

Conclusion

In this essay, I examined two prose writers and a poet attempting to explain their art through an intriguing adoption of Shelley's stance as the quintessential Romantic *Defensor Poiesis* to develop their own novel ideas. All of them, immersed in the highly experimental and innovative period of Modernism, reflect how a poet as traditional as Shelley—and even one contested by the most influential poet of his time—could inspire a metaliterary discourse on their art. Shelley's words of wisdom became a means to defend, celebrate, or recover poets who might have been dismissed for their supposed immaturity, ultimately serving as a shield against prejudice. Shelley's idea of poetry provided a means to infuse an overly objective and impersonal literary climate with some "incandescent" ideas, such as the power of poetry to make "familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (Shelley 2002, 517), a concept later rebranded by Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky as "defamiliarization" in the early 20th century (Rognoni 2018, 1224).

For early 20th-century authors, Shelley's words came to represent an assertion of poetic supremacy: they defended an idea of poetry and an image of the poet daring to embody the paradoxical persona of the "unacknowledged legislator" (Shelley 2002, 535). This ambition lay not in a belief in their power to institute a new order but in the audacity to attempt it.

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