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Madeleine Callaghan (University of Sheffield): The Poetic

Mocking the proliferation of prescriptive theories of poetry, in *Don Juan*, Byron claimed an ambition to write his own 'poetical commandments', to be entitled, '"Longinus o'er a Bottle, / Or, Every Poet his *own* Aristotle"'.[1] Despite his sneering edge, Byron's zest for his pretend project captures something of the modern instinct to define and individuate what is, or what ought to be, the nature of the poetic. For M. H. Abrams, Romanticism marks the serious rupture from traditional paradigms handed down from the Greek and Latin poets until the advent of the English and German Romantic poets,[2] and his emphasis on Romanticism's attempt to perform a powerful break between its achievements and those of its predecessors suggests the self-consciousness at the heart of Romantic and 'post-Romantic' writers, to borrow that 'fluid' though 'necessary term'.[3] I will focus here on the poetic as represented by poets working during or after Abrams' designated break, seeing these poets as harbouring a fascination with the place of poetry in society, a place that cannot be assumed but remains open to challenge, redefinition, and refinement. Janus-faced, modern poetry both writes and unwrites its definition in every line of verse, claiming and doubting its power from moment to moment, word to word. Self-conscious in the extreme, the modern poetic adores and deplores its own possibilities.

Arrogant and embattled, swaggering yet fragile, modern poetry's sense of itself as simultaneously under attack while being fundamental to human life, seems part of the

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[1] Lord George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan* I. 204: 1631-32, *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed., introd. and notes by Jerome McGann, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 429.
[2] M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. i.
[3] Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American and Irish Poetry Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

inherent contradiction of the poetic. Shelley's version of the poet as the 'unacknowledged legislator of the world'[4] performs, in miniature, this problem. Despite the grandeur of the poet's status being the world's lawgiver, Shelley's clear-eyed writing forces him to acknowledge such a status as 'unacknowledged', rendering the formula a paradox where wry self-awareness prevents him from tipping into bombast. Such patterns of aspiration and doubt dominate the poetic, where Stephen Spender's affecting line, 'I think continually of those who were truly great' conjures his own, and a more universal yearning, to become a poet capable of expressing the heights and depths of human achievement even as Spender's poem never allows the possibility that its own poet could attain that aim.[5]

Despite formal and generic restraints, those carefully adhered to by some poets and those deliberately broken by others, the poetic's attraction hinges on its blend of limitation and possibility, by the fluidity of even its most rigid conventions. Its traditions are moulded anew in the hands of every poet. Yet individuation creates clashes between as well as bringing together like-minded poets. Poetry, natural as breathing for Tennyson, whose defence of *In Memoriam* and its ethical position, rests on his claim that: 'I do but sing because I must / And pipe but as the linnets sing',[6] is utterly if boastfully rejected by Yeats, who would bemoan poetry as arduous task, insisting: 'Better go down upon your marrow-bones / And scrub a kitchen pavement'.[7] Conflict between poets (turned, by Harold Bloom, into a seminal theory

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[4] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 701.
[5] Stephen Spender, 'The Truly Great', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 27.
[6] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* XXI, *Tennyson: Poems and Plays*, ed. T. Herbert Warren, revised and enlarged by Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 235.
[7] W. B. Yeats, 'Adam's Curse', ll. 7-8, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London, 1992), p. 106.

of influence[8]), and even a single poet's divided opinions on the nature of the poetic, propels poetry forward to new advances, new ways of thinking, and new possibilities for language. The poetic, revelling in its ambiguity, earns its power from its indefinability. Half in love with its own impossibility, the poetic was, and remains, 'unascended Heaven'[9] for its Romantic innovators and post-Romantic inheritors.

[8] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.
[9] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* 3. 4. 203, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 294.