PART II

C. Deconstruction at the
Scene of Its Reading
CHAPTER TEN

"World within World": The Theoretical Voices of Shelley’s Defence of Poetry

The relationship between reading and deconstruction has been a recurrent concern of this study. Although the unfixing of meaning is sometimes seen as making texts ‘unreadable,’ our argument has been that it also confers on them a revisability that confirms the importance of reading. The symbiotic if sometimes troubled relationship between reading and deconstruction is a crucial issue in the texts by Shelley that we shall consider, culminating in The Triumph of Life, a poem now synonymous with the deconstruction of romanticism. If Alastor remains committed to a negative hermeneutic that testifies only to Shelley’s uneasiness with its semiotic nihilism, his later texts provide no unproblematic formula for a more constructive relationship between reading and deconstruction. Producing the supplement of reading as a gap between hermeneutics and its dismantling, they force us to scrutinize not only the specific myths that reading enables us to construct, but also at times the very place of language in culture.

Labyrinths, weavings, and related figures abound in Shelley’s work, leading us at first to see his theory of language as proto-Derridean. In an essay on imagery, for instance, Shelley describes the mind as a “wilderness of intricate paths . . . a world within a world.”1 A related image is used in The Revolt of Islam, where Cythna describes how she traces signs on the sand, to range


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These woofs, as they were woven of my thought:
Clear elemental shapes, whose smallest change
A subtler language within language wrought.
(VII.xxxii)²

Ideally, the figure of a structure within a structure, as in the case of the epipsyche that is a “soul within our soul” (SPP, p. 474), is associated with an epoché, a grasping of essence. But in this passage the way in which articulation generates a secondary discourse is seen as a process of displacement, by which clear elemental shapes are subtly shifted and complicated. Nor does Shelley allow us a protective dichotomy between conception and expression, for similar figures are used to describe thought, vision, and emotion.³ Nevertheless, Shelleyan dissemination remains uniquely romantic, for as Geoffrey Hartman comments, Shelley’s thinking is both “antireligious” and “radically spiritual.”⁴ What we find in his work is therefore a phenomenology of disarticulation, a deconstruction of transcendental signifieds that paradoxically remains a defense of poetry. The source of this paradox is precisely that Shelley’s deconstruction is not formalist, for he is concerned above all with the power of difference, and with power as something that produces effects. Although Shelley’s concern with reception is less explicit than that of Kierkegaard or Schleiermacher, the Defence is nevertheless central to this study because it gives us the other side of the equation: the theory of poetry as a self-displacing energy, from which arises both the need for and the reconception of the supplement of reading.

In approaching the Defence I focus on two problems: that of writing, or the mediation of conception through expression, and that of reading, whether it means referring the text to a source and recovering the original conception from what survives of it in the text, or whether it means deconstructing and refiguring the text. The question of reading arises as something distinct from writing because it involves for Shelley the application of the text to life and the problem of its authority, rather than the study of its internal relations or of its relation to a transcendental signified. A theory of reading involves the ethics and pragmatics of the text, where a theory of writing is concerned with its metaphysics and ontology. As a sceptic, Shelley was persuaded that metaphysics was a

source only of "negative truths" and must be supplemented by ethics.\(^5\)

Thus we ignore a crucial part of the dialectic of deconstruction in his texts if we do not consider them in their affective as well as representative dimension. But the problems of writing and reading are also articulated across certain fissures in Shelley’s thought. For there are in the _Defence_ two radically different theories of writing and reading that reflect two very different views of the stability of the sign. When Shelley sees writing as the inadequate translation of an anterior conception, reading becomes a supplementary act that bypasses language to recover the intention of the work. But Shelley is also unable to posit a ‘work’ prior to its expression in language. Eventually, if he is to continue seeing reading as that which redirects the negativity of the text, it must be a very different kind of reading: one that makes the text a resource rather than a source.

It is only very occasionally that Shelley views the relationship between signifier and signified as unproblematic. More often, he sees language as interposing between conception and its communication but rationalizes the disseminative effects of representation in terms of a vocabulary of source and emanation. The precise philosophic affiliations of this vocabulary are difficult to pin down. At times it seems neo-platonic, as in the description of poetry as an “echo of the eternal music” (_SPP_, p. 485). Sometimes the neo-Platonism is internalized, as Wasserman points out,\(^6\) and the source is seen as “curtained within the invisible nature of man” (_SPP_, p. 483). But whether conception and expression are opposed as higher and lower or as inner and outer, the point is that Shelley seems to posit an origin outside language, either in some transcendent power or in the consciousness of the author. The famous passage on the text as a fading coal will suffice as an example. Not only does it idealize the differential process of language as alienation from a source, it also explains the autonomous power of language to displace thought in terms of a prophetic spirit that comes and goes, and that thus allows us to marginalize certain parts of the text as mere intervals in the presence of spirit to itself:

> 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, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its


approach or its departure. . . . when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline. (*SPP*, p. 503–4)

From the sense that expression illegitimately disrupts conception arises a theory of reading as a supplement to the fissured text, a theory paralleled in the German hermeneutic tradition. For at several points in the *Defence* Shelley defers the identity of the work with itself from the written text, which is allowed to be fragmentary and inchoate, to a pre- or translinguistic work that the reader intuits “beyond and above consciousness” (*SPP*, p. 486). Defining ‘poetry’ as a spirit rather than a specific literary form, he claims that it may be concentrated in separable parts of a composition that allow the reader to reconstruct a conception disarticulated by the text as it exists: “A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it may be found in a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought” (*SPP*, pp. 485–86). Such reconstruction, he suggests, occurs because of the ability of single motifs to trigger archetypal patterns shared by author and reader alike: “a word, a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past” (*SPP*, p. 505). Whether the conception envisioned here is one that precedes the text or one that is produced through a teleological completion of it is not clear. Images of fading, echoing, and reflecting, which imply a substance above or prior to the shadow of expression, alternate with images of growth and process such as the description of thoughts as “germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time” or of words as a “lightning which has yet found no conductor” (*SPP*, pp. 483, 500). Implicit in the former is a hermeneutics of recovery linked to a deferred formalism in which there is indeed an aesthetic whole that precedes writing. Milton, Shelley claims, “conceived the Paradise Lost as a whole before he executed it in portions” (*SPP*, p. 504). But implicit in the second kind of image is a divinatory hermeneutics perilously allied with an aesthetics of process that threatens to deconstruct it. As in Hegel’s analysis of art forms that disjoin the idea and its embodiment, the reader divines what is only potentially in the text by relating it to an unfolding whole and seeing it as an episode “to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world” (*SPP*, p. 493; cf. also p. 494).

The *Defence* does not at first sight seem to deal with hermeneutics. But we cannot grasp the crucial role that the supplement of reading plays in it, unless we remember how much Shelley is concerned with discrepancies between the Idea of poetry and the historical forms it assumes. Narrative, for instance, being rooted in the circumstantial, is a disfigura-
tion of poetry. Unless 'invested' by poetry, it is a mirror "which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful," where poetry "is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" (SPP, p. 485). Drama, likewise, is acceptable only "so long as it continues to express poetry," and to dissolve and dissipate only in order to recreate, like a "prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them" (SPP, p. 491). But virtually all the major canonical texts, not to mention the bulk of Shelley’s own writings, are either narrative or dramatic. Thus they can become 'poetry' only with the aid of a reader who will save the text from the disfigurations of history or representation. And it is precisely such a reader that Shelley himself becomes in his interpretations of Homer, Dante, and Milton, which provide a theoretical model for the readings often inscribed in what we have called hermeneutic texts. In dealing with Homer, he is confronted with the awkward fact that Homer’s heroes do not always display the moral perfection necessary to 'poetry.' As prophetic reader, Shelley must bracket the historically limited text and discern behind the "temporary dress" of historical prejudice in which the writer’s “creations must be arrayed" the “internal nature" of the work which “cannot be ... concealed by its accidental vesture” (SPP, p. 487). The case of Dante provides a more elaborate example of the principle of understanding an author better than he understands himself. If Dante’s demotion of the Greeks and Romans to purgatory and hell seems sectarian, the 'true' Dante, according to Shelley, comes out in his unusual placement of the non-Christian Riphaeus in paradise. This episode allows Dante to observe “a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments” and to further the goals of a world-historical spirit, without himself being fully “conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted” in his mind between his “own creeds and that of the people” (SPP, p. 498). In other words, Shelley’s reading of The Divine Comedy proceeds on the principle that the work is to be found in unassimilated portions of the text, in revolutionary sparks that a later reader develops, often in opposition to what the major portion of the text seems to say. The reading is essentially similar to one we sketched for Coleridge’s Christabel, where the conclusion to part II tries to provide such a spark and to invite readers to generate from it the current that will allow them to counterread the text into what it should be.

This traditional hermeneutic is legitimized by the assumption of a conception that exists apart from its representation. But Shelley is profoundly uneasy with this idea, and more positively there is a side of him that sees dissemination as a source of imaginative power. That there is in the Defence the embryo of a deconstructive theory of poetry becomes clear toward the end, where Shelley uses two rather unexpected images
for poetry. The first passage begins in a characteristically hyperbolic way and defines poetry in terms of a Coleridgean unity of opposites:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; . . . it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life. (SPP, p. 505)

On the most obvious level the poisonous waters suggest a Dionysiac source for poetry at odds with the transcendent source implied in earlier images of it as an “echo of the eternal music” (SPP, p. 485). Moreover, the curious figure of the poet as alchemist betrays a fear that there may be something illegitimate in the attempt to transmute base matter into gold. At the very least, poetry seems to be a ghostly rather than spiritual force, inhabiting material radically at odds with its intentions. One inevitably asks whether poetry is not just as likely to be inhabited by what it seeks to invest. But the passage is also worth considering on the level of the signifier. For it is an example of how the very copiousness of Shelley’s figurative rhetoric unravels the statement to be illustrated through it. Illustration and repetition make expression a differential process, by creating crevices between the parts of an analogy or between the different discursive planes (conceptual and figurative, abstract and concrete) that supplement and repeat each other. What happens in this passage is, on a larger scale, what happens in the logic of the essay as a whole. Shelley repeats the idea of a source prior to language and makes it alternately external and internal to the self. Similarly, he repeats the idea of a work that is more complete than the text and suggests that it has once existed and also that it does not yet exist. He thus unsettles the authority of any single conceptual representation of the ‘work’ within this field of substitutions.

Even more disruptive is an earlier comparison of poetry to a flower, which exposes a dangerous subtext in the organic analogy:

Poetry is indeed something divine. . . . It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; . . . It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and the splendour of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. (SPP, p. 503)

‘Texture’ is, curiously enough, the term that John Crowe Ransom will use to describe a poetry that is part of the world’s body, and that thereby
becomes more dense and real. For Shelley, however, the implications of the body are less innocent. They extend not only to the nature of poetry, as something involved in the darker side of life, but also to its structure and functioning. As Shelley follows the image, it disarticulates what he is saying; it enacts as well as provides an image of the process of language as difference. The flower is not only a surface, but also an interior, a texture. Moreover, it is not just that the surface conception of the poem is at odds with the narrative articulations that compose it. These hidden articulations and fragmentations, as the word ‘texture’ suggests, are themselves complexly interwoven and do not compose a monolithic ‘inside’ or ‘reality’ that can be opposed to the surface of appearance. Nor can Shelley return thereafter to a ‘poetry’ that he himself describes as a surface. For poetry is both the root and the blossom, which means that the color of the rose cannot be abstracted from the texture of the elements that compose it.

More significant as a site of theoretical tensions is Shelley’s intermittent discussion of language at the beginning of the Defence. In praising poetry, he often sounds Platonic, as when he claims that to “be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good” (SPP, p. 482). But in dealing with the more philosophically precise subject of language, he is too much of a sceptic to argue for either an immediate or a displaced relationship between words and things. Instead, he takes the Enlightenment view that language “is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone,” not to things (SPP, p. 483). This is not necessarily a problematic formulation, because the relation between thoughts and words, while arbitrary, is also immediate. But then Shelley proceeds to a more complex description of the system of language: “Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts” (SPP, p. 484). It is here that his theory of language unravels itself backward to certain seminal and unelaborated suggestions at the beginning of the essay. At first it seems Shelley has introduced a protostructuralist theory of signification by describing a free-standing system in which words (or acoustic images, in Saussure’s language) bear a stable relation to thoughts. Acoustic images or “sounds” (to use Shelley’s word) “have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent,” and it is the former, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations among signifiers, that guar-

antee the coherence of the signified and its uptake by the reader. But in at least two respects this formulation is more self-complicating than it seems. For one thing, there is the curious displacement of ‘thought’ from ground to figure and its consequent implication within a chain of signifiers. At first, words are said to signify ‘thoughts,’ and thoughts function as referents outside language, though not outside the mind. But in the second passage, “sounds as well as thoughts” have relations to that which they represent, so that ideas are now themselves signifiers representing something else, and thought is itself structured like a language. Even more problematic is the notion of interrelations between the elements of a signifying system. The idea that language is diacritical, that individual words do not contain a meaning but acquire it in relation to other words, can be seen as explaining how words clarify each other. But Shelley himself does not so see it. In the first passage quoted, he distinguishes language from other inferior systems of representation by arguing that its relation to meaning is direct rather than diacritical, and thus conceding that the interrelations of elements within a system potentially complicate meaning:

For language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments and conditions of art, have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. (SPP, p. 483)

Linguistic representation is here described as immediate, and the mediation characteristic of other systems of representation is defined in terms of their tendency to generate local complexities that interfere with the perceiver’s ability to link sign and referent. Thus we are surprised to find later on that language actually shares in the complexities of mediation, being a system in which sounds and thoughts have relations among each other. And we are even more surprised to read elsewhere that language is essentially mediation: it is not conceived in terms of a split between process and product that would keep conception apart from expression, the light apart from the cloud. Language, gesture, and the imitative arts “become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue” (SPP, p. 481). In other words, literature does not say anything abstractable from the process of saying it. But this process, as we have already seen, is a diacritical one in which each signifying element contains the trace of other elements in the system.

How diacritical relationships interfere with the process of reference is best illustrated by Shelley’s essay itself. For it is the relations between
passages that interfere with what seems to be the conception behind each passage taken individually. In the case of the first passage these interconnections disrupt a binary opposition that privileges language over less satisfactory art forms. In the case of the second passage they undermine its assumption that diacritical systems are stable and self-confirming. And in the third case they expose the problematical subtext of what seems a doctrine of organic unity that fuses medium and message.

Perhaps the best word for the complicating interconnection between elements is Shelley’s own term “intertexture” (SPP, p. 504), which he introduces disparagingly to suggest that we can go directly to an intuition of the whole without working through the parts of a text. Milton, he tells us, “conceived the Paradise Lost as a whole before he executed it in portions” (SPP, p. 504), abstracting the clear elemental shape of the poem from the texture of the elements that composed it. Shelley is thus able to dismiss the “intertexture of conventional expressions” that binds the parts together. But it needs no emphasis that in his own case it is this intertexture that produces some of the essay’s most crucial recognitions, because it is the process of intertextualizing the parts of the argument, of seeing how they are interwoven into each other, that prevents us from excerpting one statement and making it stand for the originating conception behind the work. Put differently, what Shelley here dismisses as the intertexture, a mere conjunctive convenience, is what he elsewhere calls the “interstice,” the gap between two signifying elements which brings into play their differential interpresence and ultimately their self-difference. And such gaps, he suggests, are productive. Historians like Herodotus and Livy are great because they are poets, and they are poets specifically because they use language to disrupt itself, “filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images” (SPP, p. 486), and creating detours in the straight and narrow path that leads instrumental discourse from word to referent.

At other points, too, it seems that one voice in Shelley sees poetry as a heightening of the inherent nature of language as difference. These passages occur toward the beginning of the Defence, and often one is uncertain of the intention behind them, as they seem to be the site of a theoretical crossing that is deferred—perhaps deliberately. Curiously, one of them is the opening distinction between reason and imagination, which seems at first to be a predictable romantic distinction between the analytic faculty that “murders to dissect,” and the holistic, esemplastic power of imagination which binds disparate elements into a unity. Indeed, Shelley does specifically associate imagination with the capacity to perceive similitudes, following the familiar identification of imagination with love, or in Wordsworth’s words, with the capacity to observe “af-
finities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To passive minds" (P II.384–86). But what is interesting is the precise way in which Shelley describes the creative power of imagination: as “mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity” (SPP, p. 480). Though he begins with the familiar image of the mind as lamp rather than mirror, projecting its light onto phenomena so as to synthesize them, he seems to grant the process of thought a certain autonomy from the intentional act that initiates it. He describes not only how the mind acts on a received quantum of thoughts, so as to create new relations between them, but also the process by which thoughts re-act upon the mind itself, so that the light of the mind is no longer a conception prior to expression but the process of expression itself. For what is striking here is that acts of mind are only momentarily synthetic. Inasmuch as they compose from thoughts other thoughts, they are ultimately disseminative, because the new thoughts each contain within themselves the principle of their own integrity and thus cannot be subordinated to each other or to the originating thought. This account of how we think renders very exactly the exploratory and partly deconstructive character of Shelley’s own imagistic practice, which William Empson describes in terms of discovering an idea in the act of writing, and which F. R. Leavis criticizes as a “general tendency of the images to forget the status of the metaphor or simile that introduced them and to assume an autonomy and a right to propagate.”

Perhaps a good example of how the Shelleyan image functions as a conflictual but productive force, in which an idea is embodied in a figure whose subtext generates a different and autonomous idea, is a disturbing passage in the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”: “Thou—that to human thought art nourishment, / Like darkness to a dying flame!” (ll. 44–45, SPP). Hitherto the ideal, originally referred to only as a power (l. 1, SPP), and sometimes operating with capricious inconstancy, has been described in Apollonian analogies such as music, clouds, and moonbeams. The figure of darkness can seem to continue the idea of beauty as fostering human development, in the sense that darkness sets off the brightness of the flame. Yet one has to struggle to extract this secondary connotation from the image, given the overwhelming implication that darkness smothers the dying flame. The different associations of the image cause it to function as a switch-point in the poem, composing from

one thought another thought that cannot be synthesised with the first because it contains the principle of its own integrity.

That the imaginative process as described by Shelley is radically different from that conceived by Coleridge is apparent from the fact that Shelley links it in a draft to the power of association. Associationism sees thought as a disseminative process, tracing an idea back to its origin in a train of associations that makes it different from itself, or recognizing it as part of a constellation of ideas that are called into play along with it and disrupt its referential stability. It is no coincidence that what are now described as ‘paradigmatic’ relations, which expand the particular word into “an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms,” were originally described by Saussure as “associative” relations. Far from being rejected or transcended in the idea of an esemplastic imagination, associationism reweaves a certain strand in romantic thinking so as to draw it away from the idea of formal unity. Coleridge himself, as Jerome Christensen points out, is far from unequivocal in dismissing it. He seems at one point to do no more than replace the association of ideas with the association of feelings, conceding the validity of the psychological model but making association a phenomenological rather than a mechanical process. But it is Dilthey who more explicitly clarifies the romantic reconstitution of associationism, linking his reservations to the fact that it has hitherto been conceived in atomistic and mechanical rather than creative terms. For association as conceived in the eighteenth century mechanically reproduces “given elements in a given combination,” unlike imag-

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10Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 125–27. Saussure’s distinction of associative from syntagmatic relations suggests that they tend to be disseminative and logocentric, respectively: “Whereas a syntagm immediately suggests an order of succession and a fixed number of elements, terms in an associative family occur neither in fixed numbers nor in a definite order. . . . A particular word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of co-ordinated terms” (p. 126).
13In an 1803 letter to Southey, Coleridge writes, “I hold, that association depends in a much greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of Feeling, than on Trains of Ideas. . . . I almost think, that Ideas never recall Ideas, as far as they are Ideas—any more than Leaves in a forest create each other’s motion—the Breeze it is that runs thro’ them, / it is the Soul, the state of Feeling—”: E. L. Griggs, ed., Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), II, 961.
ination “which produces new combinations from the given elements.” As such, it is merely repetitive, where the imagination is fundamentally metamorphic.\textsuperscript{14} The fault of eighteenth-century associationism, Dilthey suggests, is that it “starts with representations as fixed quantities. Changes in representations are allowed to occur externally through association, fusion, and apperception.” Paradoxically, the romantic imagination is no less associative, but in a more organic way. Association does not simply involve linking elements together but causing them to act and react on each other: “In the real psyche, therefore, every representation is a process. Even the sensations which are connected in an emotion, and the relations existing among them, are subject to inner transformations.”\textsuperscript{15}

Drawing on Goethe, Dilthey thus describes a metamorphic imagination in which images transform themselves and “unfold unhampered.”\textsuperscript{16} Shelley, however, goes much farther in abandoning both imaginative closure and the affiliation of metamorphosis with organic plenitude: “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food” (\textit{SPP}, p. 488). Here the generative power of imagination is traced to its negativity. Imagination keeps itself in being as desire by constantly disarticulating its attempts at closure. In associating and compounding thoughts, it becomes aware of the gaps between them, which it fills by introducing new thoughts, which in turn create further gaps. Perhaps in the light of the above we should reconsider what Shelley means in describing reason as analytic and imagination as synthetic. Analysis fixes the relations between elements so as to use them instrumentally, considering “thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results” (\textit{SPP} p. 480). Synthesis, which does not have the holistic connotations we might assume, is the dissemination of systematic relations. A “synthetical view of the universe” as described in the “Treatise on Morals” involves being aware that perceptions can be “indefinitely combined,” and takes us beyond those “ordinary systems” that use definite combinations and therefore limit the range of our perceptions.\textsuperscript{17} Crucial to Shelley’s view of imagination as the power of difference and displacement is his description of language as essentially figurative. The language of poets, Shelley argues, “is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unap-

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 68. Cf. also pp. 70, 105.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 107.
prehended relations of things" (SPP, p. 482). It would be a mistake to treat this passage as another romantic platitude about the organic versus the fixed, the imaginative versus the rational. For like Nietzsche after him, Shelley preserves the form of the binary opposition by which earlier romantics like Coleridge valorize imagination but redefines its content. The view that language either declined or developed from the figurative and concrete to the abstract and conceptual is common enough. What is unusual is the way Nietzsche defines metaphor or the concrete, as the perception of difference rather than affinity. Philosophic language, according to him, identifies and defines, so as to create self-identical concepts. It misleads us into abstracting things from their intertexture, “into grasping things as simpler than they are, separate from one another, indivisible, each existing in and for itself.” On the contrary, in Derrida’s words there is no simple element that avoids being “constituted on the trace within it of other elements of the chain or system.” Thus the function of poetry is to resensitize us to the knowledge that concepts represent not one but several things and are therefore different from themselves. More specifically, because ideas originate through the fundamentally figurative procedure of “equating the unequal,” the function of metaphor is to renew, by displacing the ideas it conveys, our awareness of the substitution and displacement at the heart of all representation. Where the formation of ideas, according to Nietzsche, involves a will-to-power that represses difference, the awareness of metaphor “constantly confuses the rubrics and cells of the ideas, by putting up new figures of speech, metaphors, metonymies.” Similarly, for Shelley the function of metaphor is to “create afresh the associations” (SPP, p. 482) that, as we have seen previously, disseminate meaning. Its function is to put us in touch with that originary difference that is the source of linguistic vitality. Interestingly, Shelley, unlike Nietzsche, does use the word ‘similitude’ in explaining the words “vitally metaphoric.” But he also speaks of the “before unprehended relations of things,” and “relations” have emerged as disruptive elsewhere in the Defence. They interpose between conception and expression, which in the present context is desirable, since it impedes the overly rapid conversion of words into readable signs that leads to linguistic atrophy.

We should not be too dogmatic in seeing the Defence as the precursor of a Nietzschian and phenomenological deconstruction. But neither is it

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anachronistic to place it in transit toward Nietzsche’s early work, because
writers like Warburton and Blair were already developing theories of
figurative language that laid the ground for the romantics to explore the
subtexts of their own most cherished postulates. That primitive lan-
guage was more figurative and that poetry is earlier than prose were of
course commonplaces. But Blair goes beyond other writers like Adam
Ferguson to consider the structure of tropological thought. All tropes,
he argues, “are founded on the relation which one object bears to an-
other; in virtue of which, the name of the one can be substituted instead
of the name of the other.”21 As substitutions and condensations, figures
are already part of the process of reduction at the heart of representa-
tion, which goes even further in abstract thought. Figurative language
arose for reasons of economy, because “no language is so copious, as to
have a separate word for every separate idea,” and hence we made “one
word . . . stand also for some other idea or object.”22 But figures, we
may argue, are similitudes that reveal how they are constituted on the
trace of difference, whereas concepts are dead metaphors that have
repressed their origin in difference. Blair does not really develop his
suggestions in the direction I am suggesting. But he does lay the ground
for others to pursue an archeology of language and to see metaphor as
closer than abstraction to that presence-as-difference that underlies all
language. For implicit in Blair is a sense that conceptual language is
subtended by what Nietzsche calls a “philosophic mythology,”23 and that
the obvious origin of figures in difference makes them an appr opriate
site for the discovery that all signifying units, whether they function in
language or in the language of the world, are implicated in an intertex-
tual network: “every idea or object carries in its train some other ideas,
which may be considered as its accessories . . . [it] never presents itself to
our view isolé.”24

Equally useful for uncovering the Shelleyan subtext is Warburton’s
linguistic rather than mystical discussion of hieroglyphics in The Divine
Legation of Moses. A crucial passage in the Defence already cited contrasts
language in its original state, where words are “pictures of integral
thoughts,” with the deteriorated form of language, in which words are
“signs for portions or classes of thoughts” (SPP, p. 482). Shelley else-
where expands on the notion of language as picture by praising those
poets “who have employed language as the hieroglyphic of their
thoughts” (SPP, p. 483). At first glance this contrast of hieroglyphic with

21Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 3 vols. (London: Strahan and Cadell,
1785), I, 367.
22Ibid., I, 351–52.
scientific language looks like a valorization of the concrete and pictorial for their logocentric qualities. But once again the hieroglyphic is for Shelley the site of a potential theoretical crossing. Hieroglyphics are roughly equivalent for Warburton to figures for Blair. Indeed, the three kinds of hieroglyphic—curiologic, tropical, and symbolic—seem to correspond approximately to metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. More important, hieroglyphics are like figures in that they represent a second stage in the development of semiology, an abridgment or reduction of the cumbersome system in which there is a sign for every thing. At the same time, however, hieroglyphs are less abstract than alphabetic characters, because they are still “signs for things” rather than “signs for words” or sounds. Pictured characters as distinct from simple pictures are figurative condensations still close to their origins in difference. A hieroglyphic puts “one single figure for the mark or representative of several things.” It is this sense of the hieroglyph as a similitude containing the trace of difference which is crucial to Shelley. But once again Shelley goes far beyond Warburton in de-sedimenting the concept of the hieroglyph. As pictures of integral thoughts, hieroglyphs must inevitably be symbols for intensive manifolds whose parts have relations among each other that interpose between sign and reference. And this equation of thought with picture in turn casts light on what Shelley means in speaking of the “integral unity” of a thought, or in describing it as “containing within itself the principle of its own integrity” (SPP, p. 480). Integral unity is not a synthesis of opposites. Rather the integral thought is an intensive manifold not yet simplified into a sign that will fit into a system. It is a unit that asks to be read aesthetically in terms of its own internal relations and not instrumentally as a palpable design that conducts “to certain general results” (SPP, p. 480).

It is not clear that Shelley in the Defence explicitly puts forward a deconstructive theory of writing. Rather, the essay is an example of its own doctrine, a lightning that has yet found no theoretical conductor, because at the time of writing the future is still contained within the present (SPP, pp. 500, 481). But it is important to remember that this future (our future) is not constrained so much as rearticulated by the resistance it meets in Shelley’s present. Hence, in attempting a divinatory reading of the Defence, I have avoided a too literal translation of Shelley’s essay into contemporary terms, as Derrida and de Man do in interpreting Rousseau and Hegel. A divinatory reading involves a complex symbiosis of past and present. Writing in a later period allows us to ‘repeat’

26 Ibid., IV, 131.
27 Ibid., IV, 14.
the past in Kierkegaard's sense: to get everything back double in a way that Shelley's contemporaries perhaps could not. But in the process the past, too, emerges as a dialectical reduplication of the present, a repetition that unfolds the doubleness within the present.

A Defence of Poetry inhabits the fold that divides romantic organicism and idealism from romantic deconstruction but also marks their continuity. As such, it sets in motion a dialogue of the past with(in) the present. It cannot have escaped notice how many of the essay's major statements face, like Janus, in two directions. Shelley insists on the imagination as dynamic and vital but thereby unable to fix meaning. He insists that poetry is infinitely rich, but only because it constantly disseminates meaning in order to recreate afresh the associations disorganized by habit. To say this is to characterize the fold, to point to a 'romantic deconstruction' and to unfold its difference from poststructuralism. For one thing, the former continues to valorize imagination, though hardly in the logocentric way conceived by Coleridge. Moreover, Shelley images the activity of deconstruction in organic terms, through analogies such as the flower whose petals disclose a calyx. These analogies refigure but also bear the traces of Goethe's inquiry into the metamorphic unity of plant structure and claim for the deconstructive activity a processive though not a formal or teleological unity. To argue, as de Man might do, that as metaphors these images are merely sublimatory would be to go against the very assumptions of deconstruction itself, which unsettles any geological arrangement of literal and figural as 'false' and 'true.' Finally, Shelley describes something that sounds very much like deconstruction and describes it not in terms of 'textuality' but through the use of phenomenological and affective terms like 'power,' that make his version of it postorganicist rather than poststructuralist. The term 'power' occurs only twice in the Defence, but it seems, with all the connotations that surround its usage elsewhere in Shelley, to inform his concept of poetry. It is at once a site for the deconstruction of a ground behind language and for the characterization of language as an emotional process. Idealizingly linked to the notion of a teleological spirit that produces progressive universal poetry and its divinatory reading, power also emerges as something radically unstable. As in "Mont Blanc" where it can only be known as it appears, the creative 'power' is "like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed" (SPP, p. 504). It is a series of effects or appearances rather than the cause behind them, at best a mode of functioning rather than an essence, described as a

28I refer to the passage on the fading coal (SPP, p. 504) and to the conclusion (SPP, p. 508). There are also references to poetry as a 'power' of the mind having "no necessary connexion with consciousness or will" (SPP, p. 506).
cause largely in order to provide a heuristic fiction that will allow the process of interpretation to continue. However, if power is not a source but a self-displacing energy, the very use of the term conveys the involvement of the reader and writer in this displacement. Shelley’s ‘power’ is closer to Nietzsche’s use of the term than to Hegel’s concept of a world-historical spirit, for there is much in Shelley to suggest that his Hegelian concept of a “spirit of the age” (SPP, p. 508) knows itself as a will-to-power. But it is also closer to Nietzsche’s use of the term than to Foucault’s analysis of power as an institutional and semiotic rather than psychological category.

As the *Defence* contains the seeds of a deconstructive theory of language, so, too, it contains the beginnings of a dissemnative theory of reading. Indeed, it encourages the kind of reading attempted here, which paradoxically renews the originality of the text by liberating it from the tyranny of the original intention behind it. A heuristic theory of reading emerges less from formal statements made in the *Defence* than from the interpretive practice it generates if we read it intertextually rather than as the source of certain founding critical doctrines. For as I shall go on to suggest, the fact that Shelley composed his text out of so many voices means that its theoretical position is nowhere embodied in it: what is said is constantly undermined, and what can be said is not necessarily said in any explicit way. The *Defence* works not through logical, sequential argument but through images. It conforms to Shelley’s definition of poetry in that the use of image rather than statement gives the sense of a dissemnative excess “which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (SPP, p. 491). The essay, in other words, does not contain its meaning. A heuristic theory of reading is thus one that we must construct in those interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. One discerns the presence of such a theory partly because the deconstructive statements on language provide a background against which Shelley’s own ‘hermeneutic’ readings of Homer and Dante emerge as acts of will. His recourse to a traditional hermeneutic is itself an interstitial position that tries to close the gap between what poetry should be and what it is. Disclosing itself as supplementary, this position also manifests to us Shelley’s need to see the reader as constructing something positive out of the gaps in Dante’s or Milton’s text. Thus, the gap created in the *Defence* by the compensatory quality of Shelley’s interpretations stimulates us to construct something positive out of what might otherwise be a deconstruction of his hermeneutics. In part, one also discerns a need for a heuristic theory because the emphases of the essay make it clear that an aesthetics for Shelley is incomplete if it considers only the structural properties of language and not also the phenomenology of creation and reception. Again and again, Shelley talks
not just of poetry or language but of their effect. To stop at a de-construction of the essay, to remain inside its aporias and not to consider the outside of the text, is simply too limited a reading.

It is fairly clear that the analyses of Dante and Milton are actually examples of heuristic and not hermeneutic reading. Informed as they are by Godwin’s distinction between moral and tendency, they re-vision what these authors were historically precluded from saying by applying the texts to Shelley’s own life and finding in them tendencies toward his revolutionary challenge to sectarianism, tyranny, and custom. Shelley’s sympathy with Godwin’s theory is apparent in his criticism of those who have a “moral aim” and in his insistence that a poet should not “embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither” (SPP, p. 488). It may be for this reason that Shelley speaks vaguely of poetry as creating the “the true and the beautiful, in a word the good” (SPP, p. 482), leaving the specific content of these abstractions for different ages to fill in differently. Ostensibly, Godwin’s theory parallels the prophetic hermeneutics of the post-Kantians, as does Shelley’s insistence on poets as mediums whose words “express what they understand not” (SPP, p. 508). But in liberating the reader from the moral authority of the author, Godwin radically historicizes reading, because future readers also cannot be bound by the authority of predecessors like Godwin or Shelley. Poetry becomes a semiclastic energy that we must use to break both the forms it assumes and those we confer on it: “Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: . . . But Poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (SPP, p. 487). The radically indeterminate nature of poetic energy is encapsulated in Shelley’s description of poets as “mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present” (SPP, p. 508). In reflecting a shadow the poem is not so much a mimesis as an intimation. Because the shadow is cast by something that does not yet exist, it is we who must partly produce the text’s meaning through a negative reading in which we infer the presence of something from its very absence: from the void it creates, which must be the absence of something. On the one hand, the word ‘gigantic’ attributes a mythic status to what the text portends. On the other hand, we can grasp this meaning only in terms of shadows that contain areas of darkness. Nor can we really see into a mirror that reflects a shadow, for the image suggests not a direct grasping of truth but a displacement of interpretation into the realm of the specular. This indeterminacy is also apparent in Shelley’s equation of the imagination with power. Increasingly used in
literary criticism by writers like De Quincey, the term ‘power’ links Shelley to a tradition that begins with Burke’s analysis of the sublime and that conceives of literature in affective rather than structural terms. But while the effects of sublimity and beauty can be calculated, power, as we have seen, cannot provide a description of the creative process that supports a traditional hermeneutic.

What, then, is the kind of reading generated by the ‘power’ of imagination? The clearest indication that his concept of reading is not always traditionally hermeneutic comes in a passage where Shelley returns to those ‘relations’ that confuse the rubrics and cells of our interpretations:

All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed. (SPP, p. 500)

It is clear from this passage that Shelley represents the endlessness of reading more positively than does Kierkegaard. Moreover, given the essay’s historical treatment of literature and its emphasis on poetry as a social force, we can infer that reading hermeneutically would involve the inscription of reading within culture—a possibility not raised by the German tradition. This kind of reading is best described by Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, although she does not develop the term in the direction of a theory of reading. In an intertextual framework, history and society are “seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them.”29 For Shelley, the relationship between text and reader is similarly transformational. Rewriting the Divine Comedy by organizing its relations according to cultural perspectives that would not have been possible in an earlier period, Shelley discloses Dante’s own society as a text by treating certain aspects of the poem as written by the cultural metaphors in which it is temporarily arrayed and not as a reflection of truth. The textuality of the poem, a ‘feigning’ in the word Shelley takes over from Sidney, discloses the textuality of the social codes it reflects and facilitates the poem’s transformation by its reader into something that can in turn transform not only the past but the future. This process continues beyond Shelley, for different people and ages keep interpreting the text in new ways that make it valuable not for

what it 'says' but for the heuristic role it plays in the self-understanding of each reading community.

This description of the text as a productivity whose identity is not fixed but historically variable is very different from the notion of it as a conception that precedes expression and that requires us as readers to resist dissemination in order to return to a source. To search for that first acorn is now absurd, as Droysen similarly suggests.30 The poem survives not as what it originally was but as a series of self-transformations that generate and are further generated by social transformations. But just as importantly, Shelley’s account of textuality and reception differs from current ideas of unreadability. It links the life of the text to its deconstructibility, making its interstices and gaps the shadows that futurity casts upon the present. For dissemination is precisely the site of a paradox: dissemination as the scattering and unfixing of unitary meaning, dissemination as communication.

But we must also avoid giving too firm an identity to Shelley’s theory of reading. Precisely because the Defence contains so many voices its theoretical position is nowhere embodied in it, and this mobility on the part of the text unsettles our attempts to incorporate our own theories in it through a kind of transference. The concept of dissemination just described experimentally posits an aesthetics on the basis of the difference between the idealistic and deconstructive voices in the essay. But this so-called position must be seen as the difference between and not as the synthesis of the two voices. In other words, it suffers the anxiety of being supplementary. Shelley’s essay contains no positive terms. Its identity—if one can use that word—emerges through relations between its voices: the idealistic and the deconstructive, the ontological and the pragmatic, the essentialist and the historicist. Preferring image to statement, the essay defers the theorizing of a position on either writing or reading. Contemporary critics who turn to earlier theory as to a mirror-stage, hoping it will confirm our own identity as unitary intellectual subjects, find that Shelley’s text reduplicates not one but several positions, and that the movement of substitution and exchange between these positions resituates our own positions and discloses differences within them. In turning to his later poems as mirrors that stage his theory, we similarly find that they defer the provision of a firm answer to the death of the transcendent logos. The two poems we shall consider are very different and are themselves engaged in an internal dialogue. Written before the Defence, Prometheus Unbound plays with a traditional hermeneutic that survives in the essay and probes its limits in ways that explain why the latter must contain more than one voice. Written after

30See Chapter 3, n. 5.
the Defence, The Triumph of Life renounces the traditional hermeneutic of the allegorical mode that it negatively evokes and generates from the defacement of its own representations something akin to a heuristic practice of reading, but one that must live with the gigantic shadows that the past casts upon the present.