

*from Discourse of an Italian on
Romantic Poetry*

It is already well known that the Romantics strive to divert poetry from its commerce with the senses, though it is that very commerce that gave birth to poetry in the first place and that alone guarantees its survival; instead, they wish to make poetry consort with the intellect, and to drag it from the visible to the invisible, from things to ideas, and to transform it from the material, imaginative, corporeal substance that it was into something metaphysical, reasonable, and spiritual. The Cavaliere¹ states that the poetic fury of the ancients derived above all from ignorance, which led them to marvel ‘foolishly’ at everything and detect a miracle at every turn; they imagined an infinity of supernatural forces, dreams, and phantasms; he adds that, at present, men, having pondered and learned, and being capable of understanding and knowing and individuating things clearly, and convinced of certain truths, find that these two approaches are—as he points out in his artful manner—‘incompatible as far as their reciprocal faculties are concerned, and thus that logical intuition and mythical enchantment are mutually exclusive: the human mind has therefore been disenchanting from the spell of imagination.’ [From] these things, it follows that poetry, being no longer able to deceive, should neither fictionalize nor beguile, but should always follow reason and truth. And note well, dear readers, the explicit and gaudy contradiction that lies at the very heart of this premise. It is

1. The Cavaliere is Lodovico di Breme, author of “Osservazioni sul *Giaurro*” [*Observations on The Giaour*, a fragment of a Turkish tale by Lord Byron], which appeared in the literary journal *Spettatore italiano* in 1818. In his *Observations*, Breme (“The Cavaliere”) defends Romanticism.

because of this that the Romantics, who were well aware that once they stripped poetry (which they already ill-treated) of its basic capacity to beguile, poetry as such would effectively disappear, and would fuse completely and become one with metaphysics; and once they resolved it into a complex of meditations, not only did they not entirely subjugate poetry to reason and truth, but they rather went looking for poetic arguments among the most bizarre, crazy, ridiculous, vile and superstitious opinions that they could possibly find[.]

[The Romantics] cry out that the poet, while fictionalizing, should adapt his style to today's customs and opinions and to current knowledge, [and] do not take into account that the poet works only on the imagination, does not affect the intellect, nor has he ever done so, except perhaps by chance during those most ancient times. They do not see that we, just as soon as we open a book and notice that it is written in verse, are fully aware that this book is full of fictions, and that by definition when we read poetry we are actively seeking to be beguiled and, almost without perceiving it, we prepare our imaginations to receive and to fully embrace the illusions therein; it is therefore ridiculous to assert that the poet is unable to beguile the reader unless he adapts his mode to present customs and opinions, as though we had placed restrictions upon the imagination that it should not be fooled more than so much, or as though the faculty were incapable of freeing itself—or the poet of forcefully freeing it—from those present customs and habits and opinions and such; they do not see that the intellect, even in the midst of imaginative delirium, is all the while aware of its wandering, and believes as easily in the less false as it does in the more false, as much, for example, in Milton's Angels and the allegorical substances of Voltaire as in Homer's gods as much in Bürger's spectres and the witches of Southey as in Virgil's hell, and is as easily convinced that an Angel armed with a shield 'of the purest diamond' protected Raimondo, as that Apol-

lo with the 'hirsute, fringed' shield defended Hector in battle.

My argument is not against utility, nor do I wish to rival with those philosophers who lament the refashioning of man, the exchange of apples and milk for meat, and the leaves of trees and the skins of animals made into clothes, caves and huts transformed into mansions, and wilderness and forests into cities: it is not the work of the poet but of the philosopher to consider the useful and the true; the poet, instead, occupies himself with the delightful, and specifically with what delights the imagination[.] Nature's beauties, then, having initially conformed to the characteristics of natural observers and ordered for their delight, do not vary in accordance with the variation in their observers; change in the social world has never induced a corresponding change in the natural order, which remains ever the same, a conqueror of every human thing. In order to garner from nature that pure and substantial delight which is the proper office of poetry, and which conforms to the original, primitive condition of humankind, it is necessary not that nature adapt to us, but that we adapt to nature, and therefore that poetry must not continuously change, as the moderns would have it, but rather that, like nature, it be immutable in its principal characteristics. And this adaptation of mankind to nature consists in utilizing the imagination in order to resituate ourselves in the primitive state of our forefathers. Once we do this, a stream of incredible, heavenly delights is set forth; nature, uncorrupted and unchanged, discloses to our minds her immortal power, notwithstanding our civilisation and corruption; and the fact that even nowadays, when we allow ourselves to be enchanted by poetry, these delights are the same ones that we desire naturally and above all others, can be easily understood by paying attention, more than to the fact itself, to our indisputable inclination towards whatever is primitive, natural, simple, and uncontaminated; an inclination that is almost inborn in us and whose effects remain

unnoticed precisely because they are daily. But from which other source could derive [...] the inexpressible sweetness that arises in the soul not only from the sight, but also from the thought and depictions, of rustic life, and from the poetry that represents that life, and from remembrance of early history and the stories of the patriarchs, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of their vicissitudes in the deserts and of their lives in the tents, amidst their flocks; and of almost everything recounted in Scripture, especially in the Book of Genesis? or the emotions and sense of blessedness that come with reading Homer, Hesiod, Anacreon, and Callimachus? Those two principal dispositions of the soul, the love of naturalness and disdain for affectation, derive equally from our inclination towards the primitive: both are innate, I believe, in all men, but are especially vigorous and decisive in those to whom nature granted a disposition truly adapted to the fine arts. And this inclination makes us such that whenever we encounter objects untainted by the process of civilisation, and indeed every remnant and shadow of the original natural state, we find some sort of rest and joyfully exult with vague desire: because this is a sign that nature is calling to us, inviting us, and if we try to recuse ourselves, nature, intact and pristine, constrains us; for against her force, nothing is effective: not experience, not knowledge, not discoveries, not altered customs, not culture, not artifice or ornament; no human feat, whether splendid, or grand, or ancient, or brave[.] And that what I have said is true, those of us who are not poets, musicians, artists, or of vast and sublime genius, but who are rather the readers of poets, the listeners of music, the spectators of art—whomever is not so broken, dehumanized, and distant from nature—who among these does not know or see or feel the truth of what I have said, and who cannot confirm it with absolute certainty from their own frequent experience? ❀

by Giacomo Leopardi (1798 – 1837), translated from the Italian