

'A Defence of Poetry'

*From the essay thus-named by
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822):*



[W]e live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty. The most unflinching herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is poetry. At such periods, there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature, have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations: for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age.