

# A STUDY OF POETRY



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**By Bliss Perry**

## **POETRY IN GENERAL**

"Sidney and Shelley pleaded this cause.

Because they spoke, must we be dumb?"

GEORGE E. WOODBERRY, *A New Defense of Poetry*

## A GLANCE AT THE BACKGROUND

It is a gray day in autumn. I am sitting at my desk, wondering how to begin the first chapter of this book about poetry. Outside the window a woman is contentedly kneeling on the upturned brown earth of her tulip-bed, patting lovingly with her trowel as she covers the bulbs for next spring's blossoming. Does she know Katharine Tynan's verses about "Planting Bulbs"? Probably not. But I find myself dropping the procrastinating pen, and murmuring some of the lines:

"Setting my bulbs a-row  
In cold earth under the grasses,  
Till the frost and the snow  
Are gone and the Winter passes—

\* \* \* \* \*

"Turning the sods and the clay  
I think on the poor sad people  
Hiding their dead away  
In the churchyard, under the steeple.

"All poor women and men,  
Broken-hearted and weeping,  
Their dead they call on in vain,  
Quietly smiling and sleeping.

"Friends, now listen and hear,  
Give over crying and grieving,  
There shall come a day and a year  
When the dead shall be as the living.

"There shall come a call, a foot-fall,  
And the golden trumpeters blowing  
Shall stir the dead with their call,  
Bid them be rising and going.

"Then in the daffodil weather,  
Lover shall run to lover;  
Friends all trooping together;  
Death and Winter be over.

"Laying my bulbs in the dark,  
Visions have I of hereafter.  
Lip to lip, breast to breast, hark!  
No more weeping, but laughter!"

Yet this is no way to start your chapter, suggests Conscience. Why do you not write an opening paragraph, for better for worse, instead of looking out of the window and quoting Katharine Tynan? And then it flashes over me, in lieu of answer, that I have just discovered one way of beginning the chapter, after all! For what I should like to do in this book is to set forth in decent prose some of the strange potencies of verse: its power, for instance, to seize upon a physical image like that of a woman planting bulbs, and transmute it into a symbol of the resurrection of the

dead; its capacity for turning fact into truth and brown earth into beauty; for remoulding the broken syllables of human speech into sheer music; for lifting the mind, bowed down by wearying thought and haunting fear, into a brooding ecstasy wherein weeping is changed into laughter and autumnal premonitions of death into assurance of life, and the narrow paths of individual experience are widened into those illimitable spaces where the imagination rules. Poetry does all this, assuredly. But how? And why? That is our problem.

"The future of poetry is immense," declared Matthew Arnold, and there are few lovers of literature who doubt his triumphant assertion. But the past of poetry is immense also: impressive in its sheer bulk and in its immemorial duration. At a period earlier than any recorded history, poetry seems to have occupied the attention of men, and some of the finest spirits in every race that has attained to civilization have devoted themselves to its production, or at least given themselves freely to the enjoyment of reciting and reading verse, and of meditating upon its significance. A consciousness of this rich human background should accompany each new endeavor to examine the facts about poetry and to determine its essential nature. The facts are indeed somewhat complicated, and the nature of poetry, in certain aspects of it, at least, will remain as always a mystery. Yet in that very complication and touch of mystery there is a fascination which has laid its spell upon countless generations of men, and which has been deepened rather than destroyed by the advance of science and the results of scholarship. The study of folklore and comparative literature has helped to explain some of the secrets of poetry; the psychological laboratory, the history of criticism, the investigation of linguistics, the modern developments in music and the other arts, have all contributed something to



our intelligent enjoyment of the art of poetry and to our sense of its importance in the life of humanity. There is no field of inquiry where the interrelations of knowledge are more acutely to be perceived. The beginner in the study of poetry may at once comfort himself and increase his zest by remembering that any real training which he has already had in scientific observation, in the habit of analysis, in the study of races and historic periods, in the use of languages, in the practice or interpretation of any of the fine arts, or even in any bodily exercise that has developed his sense of rhythm, will be of ascertainable value to him in this new study.

But before attempting to apply his specific knowledge or aptitude to the new field for investigation, he should be made aware of some of the wider questions which the study of poetry involves. The first of these questions has to do with the relations of the study of poetry to the general field of Aesthetics.

# **1. The Study of Poetry and the Study of Aesthetics**

The Greeks invented a convenient word to describe the study of poetry: "Poetics." Aristotle's famous fragmentary treatise bore that title, and it was concerned with the nature and laws of certain types of poetry and with the relations of poetry to the other arts. For the Greeks assumed, as we do, that poetry is an art: that it expresses emotion through words rhythmically arranged. But as soon as they began to inquire into the particular kind of emotion which is utilized in poetry and the various rhythmical arrangements employed by poets, they found themselves compelled to ask further questions. How do the other arts convey feeling? What arrangement or rhythmic ordering of facts do they use in this process? What takes place in us as we confront the work of art, or, in other words, what is our reaction to an artistic stimulus?

For an answer to such wider questions as these, we moderns turn to the so-called science of Aesthetics. This word, derived from the Greek *aisthanomai* (to perceive), has been defined as "anything having to do with perception by the senses." But it was first used in its present sense by the German thinker Baumgarten in the middle of the eighteenth century. He meant by it "the theory of the fine arts." It has proved a convenient term to describe both "The Science of the Beautiful" and "The Philosophy of Beauty"; that is, both the analysis and classification of beautiful things as well as speculation as to the origin and nature of Beauty itself. But it should be borne in mind that aesthetic inquiry and answer

may precede by thousands of years the use of the formal language of aesthetic theory. Mr. Kipling's "Story of Ung" cleverly represents the cave-men as discussing the very topics which the contemporary studio and classroom strive in vain to settle,—in vain, because they are the eternal problems of art. Here are two faces, two trees, two colors, one of which seems preferable to the other. Wherein lies the difference, as far as the objects themselves are concerned? And what is it which the preferable face or tree or color stirs or awakens within us as we look at it? These are what we call aesthetic questions, but a man or a race may have a delicate and sure sense of beauty without consciously asking such questions at all. The awareness of beautiful objects in nature, and even the ability to create a beautiful work of art, may not be accompanied by any gift for aesthetic speculation. Conversely, many a Professor of aesthetics has contentedly lived in an ugly house and you would not think that he had ever looked at river or sky or had his pulses quickened by a tune. Nevertheless, no one can turn the pages of a formal History of Aesthetics without being reminded that the oldest and apparently the most simple inquiries in this field may also be the subtlest and in a sense the most modern. For illustration, take the three philosophical contributions of the Greeks to aesthetic theory, as they are stated by Bosanquet: [Footnote: Bosanquet, History of Aesthetic, chap. 3.] (1) the conception that art deals with images, not realities, i.e. with aesthetic "semblance" or things as they appear to the artist; (2) the conception that art consists in "imitation," which they carried to an absurdity, indeed, by arguing that an imitation must be less "valuable" than the thing imitated; (3) the conception that beauty consists in certain formal relations, such as symmetry, harmony of parts—in a word, "unity in variety."

Now no one can snap a Kodak effectively without putting into practice the first of these conceptions: nor understand the "new music" and "free verse" without reckoning with both the second and the third. The value to the student of poetry of some acquaintance with aesthetic theory is sometimes direct, as in the really invaluable discussion contained in Aristotle's Poetics, but more often, perhaps, it will be found in the indirect stimulus to his sympathy and taste. For he must survey the widespread sense of beauty in the ancient world, the splendid periods of artistic creation in the Middle Ages, the growth of a new feeling for landscape and for the richer and deeper human emotions, and the emergence of the sense of the "significant" or individually "characteristic" in the work of art. Finally he may come to lose himself with Kant or Hegel or Coleridge in philosophical theories about the nature of beauty, or to follow the curious analyses of experimental aesthetics in modern laboratories, where the psycho-physical reactions to aesthetic stimuli are cunningly registered and the effects of lines and colors and tones upon the human organism are set forth with mathematical precision. He need not trouble himself overmuch at the outset with definitions of Beauty. The chief thing is to become aware of the long and intimate preoccupation of men with beautiful objects and to remember that any inquiry into the nature and laws of poetry will surely lead him into a deeper curiosity as to the nature and manifestations of aesthetic feeling in general.

## 2. The Impulse to Artistic Production

Furthermore, no one can ask himself how it is that a poem comes into being unless he also raises the wider question as to the origin and working of the creative impulse in the other arts. It is clear that there is a gulf between the mere sense of beauty—such as is possessed by primitive man, or, in later stages of civilization, by the connoisseur in the fine arts—and the concrete work of art. Thousands enjoy the statue, the symphony, the ode; not one in a thousand can produce these objects. Mere connoisseurship is sterile. "The ability to produce one fine line," said Edward FitzGerald, "transcends all the Able-Editor ability in this ably-edited universe." What is the impulse which urges certain persons to create beautiful objects? How is it that they cross the gulf which separates the enjoyer from the producer?

It is easier to ask this question than to find a wholly satisfactory answer to it. Plato's explanation, in the case of the poet, is simple enough: it is the direct inspiration of the divinity,—the "god" takes possession of the poet. Perhaps this may be true, in a sense, and we shall revert to it later, but first let us look at some of the conditions for the exercise of the creative impulse, as contemporary theorists have endeavored to explain them.

Social relations, surely, afford one of the obvious conditions for the impulse to art. The hand-clapping and thigh-smiting of primitive savages in a state of crowd-excitement, the song-and-dance before admiring spectators,

the chorus of primitive ballads,—the crowd repeating and altering the refrains,—the rhythmic song of laboring men and of women at their weaving, sailors' "chanties," the celebration of funeral rites, religious processional and pageant, are all expressions of communal feeling, and it is this communal feeling—"the sense of joy in widest commonalty spread"—which has inspired, in Greece and Italy, some of the greatest artistic epochs. It is true that as civilization has proceeded, this communal emotion has often seemed to fade away and leave us in the presence of the individual artist only. We see Keats sitting at his garden table writing the "Ode to Autumn," the lonely Shelley in the Cascine at Florence composing the "West Wind," Wordsworth pacing the narrow walk behind Dove Cottage and mumbling verses, Beethoven in his garret writing music. But the creative act thus performed in solitude has a singular potency, after all, for arousing that communal feeling which in the moment of creation the artist seems to escape. What he produces in his loneliness the world does not willingly let die. His work, as far as it becomes known, really unites mankind. It fulfills a social purpose. "Its function is social consolidation."

Tolstoy made so much of this "transmission of emotion," this "infectious" quality of art as a means of union among men, that he reduced a good case to an absurdity, for he argued himself into thinking that if a given work of art does not infect the spectator—and preferably the uneducated "peasant" spectator—with emotion, it is therefore not art at all. He overlooked the obvious truth that there are certain types of difficult or intricate beauty—in music, in architecture, and certainly in poetry—which so tax the attention and the analytical and reflective powers of the spectator as to make the inexperienced, uncultured spectator or hearer simply unaware of the presence of

beauty. Debussy's music, Browning's dramatic monologues, Henry James's short stories, were not written for Tolstoy's typical peasant. They would "transmit" to him nothing at all. But although Tolstoy, a man of genius, overstated his case with childlike perversity, he did valuable service in insisting upon emotion as a basis for the art-impulse. The creative instinct is undeniably accompanied by strong feeling, by pleasure in the actual work of production and in the resultant object, and something of this pleasure in the harmonious expression of emotion is shared by the competent observer. The permanent vitality of a work of art does consist in its capacity for stimulating and transmitting pleasure. One has only to think of Gray's "Elegy" and the delight which it has afforded to generations of men.

Another conception of the artistic impulse seeks to ally it with the "play-instinct." According to Kant and Schiller there is a free "kingdom of play" between the urgencies of necessity and of duty, and in this sphere of freedom a man's whole nature has the chance to manifest itself. He is wholly man only when he "plays," that is, when he is free to create. Herbert Spencer and many subsequent theorists have pointed out the analogy between the play of young animals, the free expression of their surplus energy, their organic delight in the exercise of their muscles, and that "playful" expenditure of a surplus of vitality which seems to characterize the artist. This analogy is curiously suggestive, though it is insufficient to account for all the phenomena concerned in human artistic production.

The play theory, again, suggests that old and clairvoyant perception of the Greeks that the art-impulse deals with aesthetic appearances rather than with realities as such. The artist has to do with the semblance of things; not with

things as they "are in themselves" either physically or logically, but with things as they appear to him. The work of the impressionist painter or the imagist poet illustrates this conception. The conventions of the stage are likewise a case in point. Stage settings, conversations, actions, are all affected by the "optique du théâtre" they are composed in a certain "key" which seeks to give a harmonious impression, but which conveys frankly semblance and not reality. The craving for "real" effects upon the stage is anti-aesthetic, like those gladiatorial shows where persons were actually killed. I once saw an unskilful fencer, acting the part of Romeo, really wound Tybalt: the effect was lifelike, beyond question, but it was shocking.

From this doctrine of aesthetic semblance or "appearance" many thinkers have drawn the conclusion that the pleasures afforded by art must in their very nature be disinterested and sharable. Disinterested, because they consist so largely in delighted contemplation merely. Women on the stage, said Coquelin, should afford to the spectator "a theatrical pleasure only, and not the pleasure of a lover." Compare with this the sprightly egotism of the lyric poet's

"If she be not so to me,  
What care I how fair she be?"

A certain aloofness is often felt to characterize great art: it is perceived in the austerity and reserve of the Psyche of Naples and the Venus of Melos:

"And music pours on mortals  
Its beautiful disdain."



The lower pleasures of the senses of taste and touch, it is often pointed out, are less pleasurable than the other senses when revived by memory. Your dinner is your dinner—your exclusive proprietorship of lower pleasure—in a sense in which the snowy linen and gleaming silver and radiant flowers upon the table are not yours only because they are sharable. If music follows the dinner, though it be your favorite tune, it is nevertheless not yours as what you have eaten is yours. Acute observers like Santayana have denied or minimized this distinction, but the general instinct of men persists in calling the pleasures of color and form and sound "sharable," because they exist for all who can appreciate them. The individual's happiness in these pleasures is not lessened, but rather increased, by the coexistent happiness of others in the same object.

There is one other aspect of the artistic impulse which is of peculiar importance to the student of poetry. It is this: the impulse toward artistic creation always works along lines of order. The creative impulse may remain a mystery in its essence, the play of blind instinct, as many philosophers have supposed; a portion of the divine energy which is somehow given to men. All sorts of men, good and bad, cultured and savage, have now and again possessed this vital creative power. They have been able to say with Thomas Lovell Beddoes:

"I have a bit of fiat in my soul,  
And can myself create my little world."

The little world which their imagination has created may be represented only by a totem pole or a colored basket or a few scratches on a piece of bone; or it may be a temple or a symphony. But if it be anything more than the mere whittling of a stick to exercise surplus energy, it is ordered play or labor. It follows a method. It betrays remeditation. It is the expression of something in the mind. And even the mere whittler usually whittles his stick to a point: that is, he is "making" something. His knife, almost before he is aware of what he is doing, follows a pattern—invented in his brain on the instant or remembered from other patterns. He gets pleasure from the sheer muscular activity, and from his tactile sense of the bronze or steel as it penetrates the softer wood. But he gets a higher pleasure still from his pattern, from his sense of making something, no matter how idly. And as soon as the pattern or purpose or "design" is recognized by others the maker's pleasure is heightened, sharable. For he has accomplished the miracle: he has thrown the raw material of feeling into form—and that form itself yields pleasure. His "bit of fiat" has taken a piece of wood and transformed it: made it expressive of something. All the "arts of design" among primitive races show this pattern-instinct.

But the impulse toward an ordered expression of feeling is equally apparent in the rudimentary stages of music and poetry. The striking of hands or feet in unison, the rhythmic shout of many voices, the regular beat of the tom-tom, the excited spectators of a college athletic contest as they break spontaneously from individual shouting into waves of cheering and of song, the quickened feet of negro stevedores as some one starts a tune, the children's delight in joining hands and moving in a circle, all serve to illustrate the law that as feeling gains in intensity it tends toward ordered expression. Poetry, said Coleridge, in one of his

marvelous moments of insight, is the result of "a more than usual state of emotion" combined "with more than usual order."

What has been said about play and sharable pleasure and the beginning of design has been well summarized by Sidney Colvin: [Footnote: Article on "The Fine Arts" in Encyclopaedia Britannica.]

"There are some things which we do because we must; these are our necessities. There are other things which we do because we ought; these are our duties. There are other things which we do because we like; these are our play. Among the various kinds of things done by men only because they like, the fine arts are those of which the results afford to many permanent and disinterested delight, and of which the performance, calling for premeditated skill, is capable of regulation up to a certain point, but that point passed, has secrets beyond the reach and a freedom beyond the restraint of rules."

### **3. "Form" and "Significance" in the Arts**

If the fine arts, then, deal with the ordered or harmonious expression of feeling, it is clear that any specific work of art may be regarded, at least theoretically, from two points of view. We may look at its "outside" or its "inside"; that is to say at its ordering of parts, its pattern, its "form," or else at the feeling or idea which it conveys. This distinction between form and content, between expression and that which is expressed, is temptingly convenient. It is a useful tool of analysis, but it is dangerous to try to make it anything more than that. If we were looking at a water-pipe and the water which flows through it, it would be easy to keep a clear distinction between the form of the iron pipe, and its content of water. But in certain of the fine arts very noticeably, such as music, and in a diminished degree, poetry, and more or less in all of them, the form is the expression or content. A clear-cut dissection of the component elements of outside and inside, of water-pipe and water within it, becomes impossible. Listening to music is like looking at a brook; there is no inside and outside, it is all one intricately blended complex of sensation. Music is a perfect example of "embodied feeling," as students of aesthetics term it, and the body is here inseparable from the feeling. But in poetry, which is likewise embodied feeling, it is somewhat easier to attempt, for purposes of logical analysis, a separation of the component elements of thought (i.e. "content") and form. We speak constantly of the "idea" of a poem as being more or less adequately "expressed," that is, rendered in terms of form. The actual form of a given lyric may or may not be suited to its mood, [Footnote: Certainly not, for instance, in Wordsworth's "Reverie of Poor Susan."] or the poet may not have been a

sufficiently skilful workman to achieve success in the form or "pattern" which he has rightly chosen.

Even in poetry, then, the distinction between inside and outside, content and form, has sometimes its value, and in other arts, like painting and sculpture, it often becomes highly interesting and instructive to attempt the separation of the two elements. The French painter Millet, for instance, is said to have remarked to a pupil who showed him a well-executed sketch: "You can paint. But what have you to say?" The pupil's work had in Millet's eyes no "significance." The English painter G. F. Watts often expressed himself in the same fashion: "I paint first of all because I have something to say.... My intention has not been so much to paint pictures that will charm the eye as to suggest great thoughts that will appeal to the imagination and the heart and kindle all that is best and noblest in humanity.... My work is a protest against the modern opinion that Art should have nothing to say intellectually."

On the other hand, many distinguished artists and critics have given assent to what has been called the "Persian carpet" theory of painting. According to them a picture should be judged precisely as one judges a Persian rug—by the perfection of its formal beauty, its harmonies of line, color and texture, its "unity in variety." It is evident that the men who hold this opinion are emphasizing form in the work of art, and that Millet and Watts emphasized significance. One school is thinking primarily of expression, and the other of that which is expressed. The important point for the student of poetry to grasp is that this divergence of opinion turns upon the question of relative emphasis. Even pure form, or "a-priori form" as it has sometimes been called,—such as a rectangle, a square, a cube,—carries a certain

element of association which gives it a degree of significance. There is no absolutely bare or blank pattern. "Four-square" means something to the mind, because it is intimately connected with our experience. [Footnote: See Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetic*, pp. 19, 29, 39, and Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, p. 83.] It cannot be a mere question of balance, parallelism and abstract "unity in variety." The acanthus design in architectural ornament, the Saracenic decoration on a sword-blade, aim indeed primarily at formal beauty and little more. The Chinese laundryman hands you a red slip of paper covered with strokes of black ink in strange characters. It is undecipherable to you, yet it possesses in its sheer charm of color and line, something of beauty, and the freedom and vigor of the strokes are expressive of vitality. It is impossible that Maud's face should really have been

"Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,  
Dead perfection, no more."

Nevertheless, though absolutely pure decorative beauty does not exist, the artist may push the decorative principle very far, so far, indeed, that his product lacks interest and proves tedious or nonsensical. There is "nonsense-verse," as we shall see later, which fulfills every condition for pure formal beauty in poetry. Yet it is not poetry, but only nonsense-verse.

Now shift the interest from the form to the meaning contained in the work of art, that is, to its significance. An expressive face is one that reveals character. Its lines are suggestive of something. They are associated, like the lines of purely decorative beauty, with more or less obscure

tracts of our experience, but they arouse a keen mental interest. They stimulate, they are packed closely with meaning, with fact, with representative quality. The same thing is true of certain landscapes. Witness Thomas Hardy's famous description of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*. It is true of music. Certain modern music almost breaks down, as music, under the weight of meaning, of fact, of thought, which the composer has striven to make it carry.

There is no question that the principle of significance may be pushed too far, just as the principle of decorative or purely formal beauty may be emphasized too exclusively. But is there any real antagonism between the elements of form and significance, beauty and expressiveness? This question has been debated ever since the time of Winckelmann and Lessing. The controversy over the work of such artists as Wagner, Browning, Whitman, Rodin has turned largely upon it.

Browning himself strove to cut the difficult aesthetic knot with a rough stroke of common sense:

"Is it so pretty  
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,  
Sorrow or joy? Won't beauty go with these?"  
[Footnote: "Fra Lippo Lippi."]

He tried again in the well-known passage from *The Ring and the Book*:

"So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,  
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,—  
So note by note bring music from your mind  
Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived,—  
So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside."

How Whistler, the author of *Ten O'Clock* and the creator of exquisitely lovely things, must have loathed that final line! But Bosanquet's carefully framed definition of the beautiful, in his *History of Aesthetic*, endeavors, like Browning, to adjust the different claims of form and significance: "The beautiful is that which has characteristic or individual expressiveness for sense-perception or imagination, subject to the conditions of general or abstract expressiveness in the same medium." That is to say, in less philosophical language, that as long as you observe the laws of formal beauty which belong to the medium in which you are working, you may be as expressive or significant as you like. But the artist must be obedient to the terms of his chosen medium of expression; if he is composing music or poetry he must not break the general laws of music or poetry in order to attempt that valiant enterprise of saving a soul.



## 4. The Man in the Work of Art

Though there is much in this matter of content and form which is baffling to the student of general aesthetic theory, there is at least one aspect of the question which the student of poetry must grasp clearly. It is this: there is nothing in any work of art except what some man has put there. What he has put in is our content question; what shape he has put it into is our form question. In Bosanquet's more technical language: "A man is the middle term between content and expression." There is doubtless some element of mystery in what we call creative power, but this is a part of man's mystery. There is no mystery in the artist's material as such: he is working in pigments or clay or vibrating sound or whatever other medium he has chosen. The qualities and possibilities of this particular medium fascinate him, preoccupy him. He comes, as we say, to think in terms of color or line or sound. He learns or may learn in time, as Whistler bade him, "never to push a medium further than it will go." The chief value of Lessing's epoch-making discussion of "time-arts" and "space-arts" in his *Laokoon* consisted in the emphasis laid upon the specific material of the different arts, and hence upon the varying opportunities which one medium or another affords to the artist. But though human curiosity never wearies of examining the inexhaustible possibilities of this or that material, it is chiefly concerned, after all, in the use of material as it has been moulded by the fingers and the brain of a particular artist. The material becomes transformed as it passes through his "shop," in some such way as iron is transformed into steel in a blast furnace. An apparatus called a "transformer" alters the wave-length of an electrical current and reduces high pressure to low pressure, or the

reverse. The brain of the artist seems to function in a somewhat similar manner as it reshapes the material furnished it by the senses, and expresses it in new forms. Poetry furnishes striking illustrations of the transformations wrought in the crucible of the imagination, and we must look at these in detail in a subsequent chapter. But it may be helpful here to quote the testimony of two or three artists and then to examine the psychological basis of this central function of the artist's mind.

"Painting is the expression of certain sensations," said Carolus Duran. "You should not seek merely to copy the model that is posed before you, but rather to take into account the impression that is made upon the mind.... Take careful account of the substances that you must render—wood, metal, textures, for instance. When you fail to reproduce nature as you feel it, then you falsify it. Painting is not done with the eyes, but with the brain."

W. W. Story, the sculptor, wrote: "Art is art because it is not nature.... The most perfect imitation of nature is therefore not art. It must pass through the mind of the artist and be changed. Art is nature reflected through the spiritual mirror, and tinged with all the sentiment, feeling, passion of the spirit that reflects it."

In John La Farge's *Considerations on Painting*, a little book which is full of suggestiveness to the student of literature, there are many passages illustrating the conception of art as "the representation of the artist's view of the world." La Farge points out that "drawing from life is an exercise of memory. It might be said that the sight of the moment is merely a theme upon which we embroider the memories of

former likings, former aspirations, former habits, images that we have cared for, and through which we indicate to others our training, our race, the entire educated part of our nature."

One of La Farge's concrete examples must be quoted at length:

[Footnote: Considerations on Painting, pp. 71-73. Macmillan.]

"I remember myself, years ago, sketching with two well-known men, artists who were great friends, great cronies, asking each other all the time, how to do this and how to do that; but absolutely different in the texture of their minds and in the result that they wished to obtain, so far as the pictures and drawings by which they were well known to the public are concerned.

"What we made, or rather, I should say, what we wished to note, was merely a memorandum of a passing effect upon the hills that lay before us. We had no idea of expressing ourselves, or of studying in any way the subject for any future use. We merely had the intention to note this affair rapidly, and we had all used the same words to express to each other what we liked in it. There were big clouds rolling over hills, sky clearing above, dots of trees and water and meadow-land below us, and the ground fell away suddenly before us. Well, our three sketches were, in the first place, different in shape; either from our physical differences, or from a habit of drawing certain shapes of a picture, which itself usually indicates—as you know, or ought to know—whether we are looking far or near. Two were oblong, but of different proportions; one was more

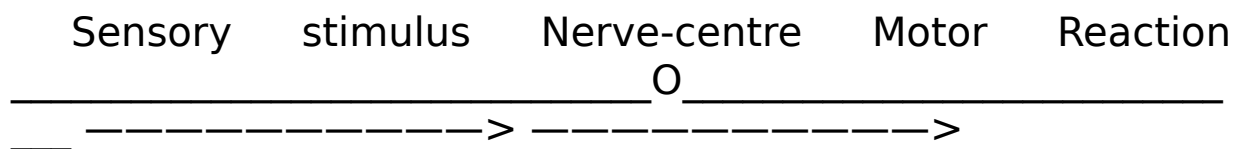
nearly a square; the distance taken in to the right and left was smaller in the latter case, and, on the contrary, the height up and down—that is to say, the portion of land beneath and the portion of sky above—was greater. In each picture the clouds were treated with different precision and different attention. In one picture the open sky above was the main intention of the picture. In two pictures the upper sky was of no consequence—it was the clouds and the mountains that were insisted upon. The drawing was the same, that is to say, the general make of things; but each man had involuntarily looked upon what was most interesting to him in the whole sight; and though the whole sight was what he meant to represent, he had unconsciously preferred a beauty or an interest of things different from what his neighbour liked.

"The colour of each painting was different—the vivacity of colour and tone, the distinctness of each part in relation to the whole; and each picture would have been recognized anywhere as a specimen of work by each one of us, characteristic of our names. And we spent on the whole affair perhaps twenty minutes.

"I wish you to understand, again, that we each thought and felt as if we had been photographing the matter before us. We had not the first desire of expressing ourselves, and I think would have been very much worried had we not felt that each one was true to nature. And we were each one true to nature.... If you ever know how to paint somewhat well, and pass beyond the position of the student who has not yet learned to use his hands as an expression of the memories of his brain, you will always give to nature, that is to say, what is outside of you, the character of the lens through which you see it—which is yourself."

Such bits of testimony from painters help us to understand the brief sayings of the critics, like Taine's well-known "Art is nature seen through a temperament," G. L. Raymond's "Art is nature made human," and Croce's "Art is the expression of impressions." These painters and critics agree, evidently, that the mind of the artist is an organism which acts as a "transformer." It receives the reports of the senses, but alters these reports in transmission and it is precisely in this alteration that the most personal and essential function of the artist's brain is to be found.

Remembering this, let the student of poetry now recall the diagram used in handbooks of psychology to illustrate the process of sensory stimulus of a nerve-centre and the succeeding motor reaction. The diagram is usually drawn after this fashion:



The process is thus described by William James:  
[Footnote: Psychology, Briefer Course, American Science Series, p. 91.  
Henry Holt.]

"The afferent nerves, when excited by some physical irritant, be this as gross in its mode of operation as a chopping axe or as subtle as the waves of light, convey the excitement to the nervous centres. The commotion set up in

the centres does not stop there, but discharges through the efferent nerves, exciting movements which vary with the animal and with the irritant applied."

The familiar laboratory experiment irritates with a drop of acid the hind leg of a frog. Even if the frog's brain has been removed, leaving the spinal cord alone to represent the nervous system, the stimulus of the acid results in an instant movement of the leg. Sensory stimulus, consequent excitement of the nerve centre and then motor reaction is the law. Thus an alarmed cuttlefish secretes an inky fluid which colors the sea-water and serves as his protection. Such illustrations may be multiplied indefinitely. [Footnote: See the extremely interesting statement by Sara Teasdale, quoted in Miss Wilkinson's *New Voices*, p. 199. Macmillan, 1919.] It may seem fanciful to insist upon the analogy between a frightened cuttlefish squirting ink into sea-water and an agitated poet spreading ink upon paper, but in both cases, as I have said elsewhere, "it is a question of an organism, a stimulus and a reaction. The image of the solitary reaper stirs a Wordsworth, and the result is a poem; a profound sorrow comes to Alfred Tennyson, and he produces *In Memoriam*." [Footnote: *Counsel upon the Reading of Books*, p. 219. Houghton Mifflin Company.]

In the next chapter we must examine this process with more detail. But the person who asks himself how poetry comes into being will find a preliminary answer by reflecting upon the relation of "impression" to "expression" in every nerve-organism, and in all the arts. Everywhere he must reckon with this ceaseless current of impressions, "the stream of consciousness," sweeping inward to the brain; everywhere he will detect modification, selections, alterations in the stream as it passes through the higher