

Ezra Pound Papers
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Series IV. Manuscripts

The Wisdom of Poetry: typescript / n.d.

THE WISDOM OF POETRY

A book which was causing some clatter about a year ago, and which has been mercifully forgotten, a book displaying considerable vigorous, inaccurate thought, fathomless ignorance, and no taste whatever, claimed, among other things less probable, that it presented the first "scientific and satisfactory definition of poetry". The definition ran as follows: "Poetry is the expression of insensuous thought in sensuous terms by means of artistic trope, and the dignification of thought by analogically articulated imagery." The word "artistic" remains undefined and we have, therefore, one unknown thing defined in terms of another unknown thing of similar nature; a mode of definition neither "scientific" nor "satisfactory" - even though one should agree with the dogma of trope.

There follows this "more extended definition": "Poetry is the expression of imaginative thought by means only of the essentials to thought, conserving energy for thought perception - to which end all animate, inanimate and intangible things may assume the properties and attributes of tangible, living, thinking and speaking things, possessing the power of becoming what they seem, or of transfiguration into what they suggest."

This is applicable in part to the equations of analytics, in toto to painting, sculpture, and certain other arts; for it is nonsense to consider words as the only "essentials to thought"; some people think in terms of objects themselves, some in pictures, diagrams, or in musical sounds, and perception by symbolic vision is swifter and more complex than that by ratiocination.

Throughout the volume our scientist shows himself incapable of distinguishing between poetry and a sort of florid rhetorical bombast, but the definitions quoted do not suffice to prove his ignorance of his subject. They betray rather his confused mode of thought and his nescience of the very nature of definition. I shall assume that any definition to be "scientific" or "satisfactory" should have at least four parts; it should define with regard to: purpose or function; to relation; to substance; to properties.

Poetry, as regards its function or purpose, has the common purpose

of the arts, which purpose Dante most clearly indicates in the line where he speaks of :

"That melody which most doth draw
The soul unto itself."

Borrowing a terminology from Spinoza, we might say: The function of an art is to free the intellect from the tyranny of the affects, or, leaning on terms, neither technical nor metaphysical: the function of an art is to strengthen the perceptive faculties and free them from encumbrance, such encumbrances, for instance, as set moods, set ideas, conventions; from the results of experience which is common but unnecessary, experiences induced by the stupidity of the experiencer and not by inevitable laws of nature. Thus Greek sculpture freed men's minds from the habit of considering the human body merely with regard to its imperfections. The Japanese grotesque frees the mind from the conception of things merely as they have been seen. With the art of Beardsley we enter the realm of pure intellect; the beauty of the work is wholly independent of the appearance of the things portrayed. With Rembrandt we are brought to consider the exact nature of things seen, to consider the individual face, not the conventional or type face which we may have learned to expect on canvas.

Poetry is identical with the other arts in this main purpose, that is, of liberation; it differs from them in its media, to wit, words as distinct from pigment, pure sound, clay and the like. It shares its media with music in so far as words are composed of inarticulate sounds.

Our scientist reaching toward a truth speaks of "the essentials to thought"; these are not poetry, but a constituent substance of poetry.

The Art of Poetry consists in combining these "essentials to thought", these dynamic particles, si licet, this radium, with that melody of words which shall most draw the emotions of the hearer toward accord with their import, and with that "form" which shall most delight the intellect.

By "melody" I mean variation of sound quality, mingling with a variation of stress. By "form" I mean the arrangement of the verse, sic into ballades, canzoni, and the like symmetrical forms, or into blank verse or into free verse, where presumably, the nature of the thing expressed or of the person supposed to be expressing it, is antagonistic

to external symmetry. Form may delight by its symmetry or by its aptness.

The methods of this fusing, tempering and shaping concern the artist; the results alone are of import to the public.

II.

Poets in former ages were of certain uses to the community; i.e., as historians, genealogists, religious functionaries. In Provence the gai savoir was both theatre and opera. The troubadour and jongleur were author, dramatist, composer, actor and popular tenor. In Tuscany the canzone and the sonnet held somewhat the place of the essay and the short story. Elizabethan drama appeared at a time when it was a society fad to speak beautifully. Has the poet, apart from these obsolete and accidental uses, any permanent function in society? I attempt the following scientific answers:

Thought is perhaps important to the race, and language, the medium of thought's preservation, is constantly wearing out. It has been the function of poets to new-mint the speech, to supply the vigorous terms for prose. Thus Tacitus is full of Vergilian half lines; and poets may be "kept on" as conservators of the public speech, or prose, perhaps, becoming more and more an art, may become, or may have become already, self-sustaining.

As the poet was, in ages of faith, the founder and emendor of all religions, so, in ages of doubt, is he the final agnostic; that which the philosopher presents as truth, the poet presents as that which appears as truth to a certain sort of mind under certain conditions.

"To thine own self be true....." were nothing were it not spoken by Polonius, who has never called his soul his own.

The poet is consistently agnostic in this; that he does not postulate his ignorance as a positive thing. Thus his observations rest as the enduring data of philosophy. He grinds an axe for no dogma. Now that mechanical science has realized his ancient dreams of flight and sejunct communication, he is the advance guard of the psychologist on the watch for new emotions, new vibrations sensible to faculties as yet ill understood. As Dante writes of the sunlight coming through the clouds from a hidden source and illuminating part of a field, long before the painters had depicted such effects of light and shade, so are later watchers on the alert for color perceptions of a subtler sort, neither affirming them to be "astral" or "spiritual" nor denying the formulae of theosophy.

The traditional methods are not antiquated, nor are poets necessarily the atavisms which they seem. Thus poets may be retained as friends of this religion of doubt, but the poet's true and lasting relation to literature and life is that of the abstract mathematician to science and life. As the little world of abstract mathematicians is set a-quiver by some young Frenchman's deductions on the functions of imaginary values - worthless to applied science of the day- so is the smaller world of serious poets set a-quiver by some new subtlety of cadence. Why ?

A certain man named Plarr and another man whose name I have forgotten, some years since, developed the functions of a certain obscure sort of equation, for no cause save their own pleasure in the work. The applied science of their day had no use for the deductions, a few sheets of paper covered with arbitrary symbols - without which we should have no wireless telegraph.

What the analytical geometer does for space and form, the poet does for the states of consciousness. Let us therefore consider the nature of the formulae of analytics.

By the signs $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, I imply the circle. By $(a - r)^2 + (b - r)^2 = (c - r)^2$, I imply the circle and its mode of birth. I am led from the consideration of the particular circles formed by my ink-well and my table-rim, to the contemplation of the circle absolute, its law; the circle free in all space, unbounded, loosed from the accidents of time and place. Is the formula nothing, or is it cabala and the sign of unintelligible magic ? The engineer, understanding and translating to the many, builds for the uninitiated bridges and devices. He speaks their language. For the initiated the signs are a door into eternity and into the boundless ether.

As the abstract mathematician is to science so is the poet to the world's consciousness. Neither has direct contact with the many, neither of them is superhuman or arrives at his utility through occult and inexplicable ways. Both are scientifically demonstrable.