

A STUDY OF POETRY

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PREFACE

THE method of studying poetry which I have followed in this book was sketched some years ago in my chapter on "Poetry" in *Counsel Upon the Reading of Books*. My confidence that the genetic method is the natural way of approaching the subject has been shared by many lovers of poetry. I hope, however, that I have not allowed my insistence upon the threefold process of "impression, transforming imagination, and expression" to harden into a set formula. Formulas have a certain dangerous usefulness for critics and teachers, but they are a very small part of one's training in the appreciation of poetry.

I have allotted little or no space to the specific discussion of epic and drama, as these types are adequately treated in many books. Our own generation is peculiarly attracted by various forms of the lyric, and in Part Two I have devoted especial attention to that field.

While I hope that the book may attract the traditional "general reader," I have also tried

to arrange it in such a fashion that it may be utilized in the classroom. I have therefore ventured, in the Notes and Illustrations and Appendix, to suggest some methods and material for the use of students.

I wish to express my obligations to Professor R. M. Alden, whose *Introduction to Poetry* and *English Verse* I have used in my own Harvard courses in poetry. His views of metre have probably influenced mine even more than I am aware. The last decade, which has witnessed such an extraordinary revival of interest in poetry, has produced many valuable contributions to poetic theory. I have found Professor Fairchild's *Making of Poetry* particularly suggestive. Attention is called, in the Notes and Bibliography, to many other recent books on the subject.

Professors A. S. Cook of Yale and F. B. Snyder of Northwestern University have been kind enough to read in manuscript certain chapters of this book, and Dr. P. F. Baum of Harvard has assisted me most courteously. I am indebted to several fellow-writers for their consent to the use of extracts from their books, particularly to Brander Matthews for a passage from *These Many Years* and to

Henry Osborn Taylor for a passage from his *Classical Heritage of the Middle Ages*.

I wish also to thank the publishers who have generously allowed me to use brief quotations from copyrighted books, especially Henry Holt & Co. for permission to use a quotation and drawing from William James's *Psychology*, and The Macmillan Company for permission to borrow from John La Farge's delightful *Considerations on Painting*.

B. P.

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PART I

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 STUDY OF POETRY

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CHAPTER I

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 *Æsthetics*.

1. The Study of Poetry and the Study of Æsthetics

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 *Æsthetics*. 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 æsthetic inquiry and answer may precede by thousands of years the use of the formal language of æsthetic 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 æsthetic 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 æsthetic speculation. Conversely, many a Professor of æsthetics 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 *Æsthetics* 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 æsthetic theory, as they are stated by Bosanquet:¹ (1) the conception that art deals with images, not realities, i.e. with æsthetic “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

¹ Bosanquet, *History of Æsthetic*, chap. 3.

with æsthetic 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 æsthetics in modern laboratories, where the psycho-physical reactions to æsthetic 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 æsthetic 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