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William Scott
Excerpt
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The Model of Poesy

OR

The Art of Poesy Drawn into a Short or Summary Discourse

Si quisquam est qui placere se studeat bonis
Quam plurimis, et minime multos laedere,
In his hic nomen profitetur suum.

Ἐκ τοῦ Σκότου ὁ σπινθήρ

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TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR HENRY [2^r]
 LEE, KNIGHT OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER
 OF THE GARTER

It is a common saying (Right Honourable) that of two apparent evils
 the least is to be adventured upon. The vulgar commonness of this 5
 saying no whit diminisheth the dignity of the truth but adds weight of
 certainty, because things universally affirmed seem to bring nature's
 passport with them, whereby they challenge free admittance at the
 gates of every man's judgement. The two inconveniences that beset
 me are, the one, a denying myself the benefit of acknowledging a 10
 dutiful regard and honouring affection that nature (in some degree)
 and election impose on me towards Your Honour; the other, a falling
 into a gross error by reason of a disproportion I cannot so much flatter
 myself as not to see between this slender and worthless present and 15
 the duty it should represent, so as instead of expressing the honour I
 would, and am bound, I should blemish the truth and worth thereof,
 which I would not. In this difficulty affection, easily leading opinion
 (the overruler of all human resolutions), banisheth the consideration
 and consequently the fear of the unworthy fitness of this present, so
 as taking advantage of that noble disposition to courtesy whence the 20
 courtier is named, which in some measure towards myself, in much,
 much more towards some of my nearest and most dear respected
 friends Your Honour hath honourably acquitted yourself of, I choose
 rather to discover my wants and poverty than not to satisfy my desire
 to give a testimony of duty by nature and reason accompted due, 25
 making use of the ground young Julius Secundus received from his
 grave, wise kinsman, who, seeing him at school, perplexedly pensive
 after three days' study about the exordium of a declamation, blamed
 him as being over-careful with this saying: that it was not expected
 he should do better than he could. In like sort, I content myself [2^v]₃₀
 with presuming you, Sir, will be contented with the most of my least
 ability.

Thus resolved, I offer Your Honour this 'Model of Poesy' (indeed
 but modelling my dutiful affection), the first fruits of my study, which 35
 if they be (as I need not make doubt but they be) small and scanty,
 it may be some argument of excuse that they are the first; if hard-
 relished and unpleasant, that they were hastened to ripeness rather
 by some unseasonable force than of their own natural growth. Only I

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may be bold to commend them as the Corinthians commended their gift of a small town to Alexander, whose all-conquering mind scorned to be bound to any in way of beholdingness for the world, and so refused their tame kindness, till, being let to understand that such a gift was not ordinary, neither before ever offered to any but Hercules, he willingly accepted their rare present. In like manner, even for the rareness of these presented fruits (being well near without any precedent), they may be worth acceptance. In which presumption I gladly and humbly commit them to that honour, which I pray long and much may be honoured in this life till late it be honoured eternally. And so craving pardon for what I do, as well as for what I leave undone, I rest

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Your Honour's in all observance of duty most devoted,

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THE MODEL OF POESY

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Because all doctrine is but the orderly leading of the mind to the knowledge of something convenient and possible for us to know which before we knew not, and the way wherein we are to be led by this clew of discipline is the space between ignorance and science, we are therefore to make this passage by certain degrees and steps, of necessity first taking that which is nearest our understanding and which giveth light to that that ensueth, still proceeding from things known to things unknown, until we have gone through all the mazy paths that might trouble or stop the voyage of our mind in discovery of those riches she naturally covets. Now those things are nearest our understanding which are most universal (that is, which, being most simple, are the groundwork whereon the knowledge of others dependeth, which do impart of their nature to the rest), and without knowledge of them we cannot distinctly know anything that is derived from them. The definition, then, being this universal – for it consists of the first, most general principles and is the foundation (as they speak) whereon we raise the whole frame of knowledge, and the whole doctrine is no more but the rearing, fit coupling, and distinguishing all the parts from this groundwork, as you would say the extent of the definition – we therefore are taught, by those great fathers of science Plato and his scholar Aristotle, to begin with the definition of anything we intend to deliver the knowledge of. And thus in our ‘Model of Poesy’ we must proceed (if we will proceed orderly) first to lay the foundation, to define it in general; which explained we may show, by division, how all several kinds of poetry as the divers rooms and offices are built thereon, how the general is dispensed into the particulars, how the particulars are sundered by their special differences and properties, that as walls keep them from confounding one in another; and lastly what dressing and furniture best suits every subdivided part and member, that thereby direction may be given how to work in which of the kinds our nature shall inform us we are most apt for. And this is the period of discipline and farthest scope, to assist and direct nature to work, as being ordained to reduce man to his former state of moral and civil happiness, whence he is declined in that unhappy fall from his original understanding and righteousness.

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All antiquity, following their great leader Aristotle, have defined poetry to be an art of imitation, or an instrument of reason, that consists in laying down the rules and way how in style to feign or represent things, with delight to teach and to move us to good; as if one should say with the lyric Simonides (after whom Sir Philip Sidney saith) the poem is a speaking or wordish picture, as on the other side he calleth the picture a mute or speechless poem, both painter and poet lively representing, to our common sense and fancy, images of the works of nature or reason, and reason guided by virtue, or misguided by passion, the one by the eye only in colours, the other by the ear in words: the one counterfeits the sundry motions and inward affections in the outward forms of behaviour and countenance (the mind's glasses), the other pictures the same person's mind and manners in the delivering of his life and actions, and therefore Petrarch saith of the poets 'pingon cantando', they paint whilst they sing. And thus indeed Horace links them in a very near affinity when he saith 'ut pictura poesis', poesy and painting are almost one and the same thing; only so much more worthy is the poet than the painter, by how much words (the proper servants of reason) are more immediate and faithful unfolds both of the scope of him that imitates and of the thing portrayed in the imitation than those dead and tongueless shapes set out in colours only, where the painter cannot presume to be understood in that he hath artificially expressed, much less in all he would have thereupon inferred; and then far better it agrees with the poet which is (in some degree truly) said of the painter, that he discovers neither more nor less but just as much in the imitation as the reasonable soul enjoins. Whatsoever we say of their likeness and agreement, it is most true that the fittest illustration of either is by other, which thing Aristotle by his practice approves.

But because the definition and so the thing may be better understood and allowed, we will (as the logicians will us) clear the purport and truth of these three parts thereof: first of the general or *genus* (as they call that part which answers to the matter in bodily things); then of the *difference* or separating part, which (as the form) gives name and proper being to the matter; lastly of the *end* which in every instrument ought to be expressed, as being the hinge whereon the difference dependeth.

For the first, the *genus*, it is comprehended in this word, an *art*, or (to speak more plainly and vulgarly) an instrument of reason, consisting in the prescribing certain sufficient rules how to work to some good end; which I know there are some will mislike, out of

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the quintessence of their own nice conceits, and account it no less than high treason (forsooth) to that great regent Philosophy, and more than dishonour to heaven-born Poesy herself, to entitle her an art, because (they say) we thereby give her authority out of her jurisdiction and throw her down from her high seat of honour among the liberal sciences to sit with the meanest handmaids. And all this they say (truly) not unreasonably, as they mince the compass of this term *art*, restraining it to be only conversant about things material and workable, as are the servile handicrafts of clothing, building, and the rest. But we shall easily and fully agree, if by art with us (as we with Aristotle and the stream that follow him in calling it so) in a looser sense they understand a frame and body of rules compacted and digested by reason out of observation and experience, behoveful to some particular good end in our civil life.

When thus we have expounded, and (I hope) reconciled ourselves to these first objectors, immediately upstart they who (perhaps ill construing their intricate master Plato) will say, and will needs have him say, poesy is only a divine fury or inspired force, far passing the narrow limits of man's wit and therefore not possibly to be comprehended under the straits of *art*, which is a work raised wholly by man's conceit. In the meantime they see not how they consume nature quite by drowning art in a fury; and with as good reason, and to as good purpose, they may say (for poets have said as much or rather as little before them) that poesy is a thing, I know not what, poured down from heaven into their quill, I know not how, which they have no ability to order or restrain, I know not why, and then others shall learn by their sayings, I know not when. But I will deal Plato-like with these unlike Platonics (for I think Plato nothing accessory to this so unworthy a conceit) and put certain questions and interrogatories to them that shall make themselves witness against themselves, at least teach them to understand themselves and us, and keep them from impeaching any whit our art. I ask, then, is this instinct, fury, influence, or what else you list to call it, is this, I say, divine seed infused and conceived in the mind of man in despite of nature and reason, as you would say by rape? Surely they will confess no. Is it there shaped and fed without the strength and vigour of our reasonable nature? Nothing less. Is this birth prodigiously born, the limbs and joints set and disposed, without the industrious midwifery of reason? That were reasonless. Lastly, hath this issue his apparel fashioned and fitted by any other measure and rule than which reason and art tells becomes and agrees with his stature and quality? It

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were too artless to answer yes. Now, then, have we as much as we affirm or desire when we obtain that the matter or substance must be admitted, mixed with, and moulded by our nature and reason; born and disposed by the assistance of art and judgement as by the midwife; adorned with those habiliments which wit, discretion, and rules of reason shall show to be suitable and decent. I grant the poet is born so; and know they likewise the art never arrogates the making of a poet, but tells the poet how he shall make himself a poet? 5 [4^v]

For the better understanding and proof of this, consider that in every art there must be a disposition and apt ability of nature before the habit or settled quality that reduceth the works thereof into being; for art doth work upon a disposed nature and perfecteth it – so saith Viperanus of poesy especially. Neither can everyone that hath the knowledge how to work any artificial thing straightway work it; as in architecture, the skill and knowledge is in them that be only modellers – that is, they know how to build and can direct – yet without the manuary habit of hewing, squaring, etc., the frame cannot be built. Horace saith of himself he, whetstone-like, sets an edge on others whilst himself is dull; he knows by the skill how it should be done, but Nature hath not lent her assisting hand; he wanteth some of the mean abilities that come between the knowledge and the practice; and so he saith: 10 15 20

munus et officium, nil scribens ipse, docebo.

Whilst others I instruct to write,
 Myself prove myself artless quite. 25

And then I conceive of this as Amyntas did of another thing when he said:

*fui prima amante ch'intendessi
 che cosa fosse Amore.*

A man may have the disposition before he have the active habit or habitual understanding of poetry. It is enough for our art to join hand in hand with that particularity of nature or *genius* (as it is called) which inciteth and enableth art and is actuated and perfited by art, so nothing at all doth it advantage them, that some are so untoward and indisposed by nature that no instructions, no endeavour, can transform them poets. Sith even this falls out alike in oratory, as Quintilian saith in direct and peremptory terms (whatsoever the proverb say, *orator fit, poeta nascitur* – the orator is made so, the poet 30 35

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born so), though yet, I say, not in the same degree, if poetry be the
 nobler and higher faculty and by consequence not so commonly easy [5']
 to be attained unto. But I say, with Horace, nothing can be done
invita Minerva, in spite of nature; and to expect this worthy quality
 in every nature were to match Praxiteles in his folly, who would carve 5
 and grave figures in slate or chalk, that can never be polished.

Again, here am I in danger to be asked: how is it that some who
 have no art or skill be or seem good poets? Consider then, with
 Quintilian, that in every faculty there is required (which likewise we
 touched before) the nature or mind disposed, as the subject for art to 10
 work upon: there must be an inbred fertility of the ground before
 tillage can promise any fruit, and the first is of more simple necessity
 (saith he) than the latter, for all the seed and husbandry bestowed on
 beachy mould is lost, whereas good soil, even unmanured, will bring
 forth some fruit, wholesome and meetly well relished. And hereupon 15
 I conclude that a good and disposed wit, by common prudence, bare
 imitation, and practice, may write in this kind much commendably,
 but, as maimed of one wing, he cannot work into his natural height.
 And therefore are such merely natural makers seen to mar oft, to
 have great wants, errors, and superfluities, which yet are not seen 20
 of the vulgar but are discerned by the eye of the clear-seeing artist
 only. And Sir Philip Sidney, doth not he affirm this to be alike in
 other faculties, when he tells you he finds divers artless courtiers to
 have a more sound style than some professors of learning? Nay, some
 otherwise very accomplished wits and judgements shall never attain 25
 grace and soundness in style – it is too plain. Yet they will not desert
 oratory, I hope. Then shall they, of courtesy, give me leave to say that
 though Nature strike a great stroke, yet she is not all in all, since the
 time Adam's tasting the fruit of knowledge of good and evil made all
 his posterity have eyes that can see more error than they can avoid, 30
 and that now men must dig and delve for that fruit of wholesome
 knowledge which before naturally, without the tillage of art, grew
 plentifully in the orchard of Eden. Philosophers prove that creatures
 must needs have augmentation by some nourishment from without
 them, because else they should be born full grown and ripe at once, 35
 and so the elephant, that is now threescore year old ere he comes
 to the period of his growth and strength, should even as soon as he
 were cast be able to bear a castle and fighting men in it. Methinks
 the like may be said of poets: if they did not take help and increase of
 ability of art, then no poem should need any industry, but it should 40
 drop out of their pens as certain creatures do from the middle region

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of the air, being moulded in heaven first. And then what will they esteem of Virgil, that inimitable glory and prince of poets, seeing it is said that the goodly birth of his *Aeneis* saw not the light, as not being complete, till he was eleven years old, but every moment grew to perfection by the sustenance of art and industry?

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What if I grant (which is all indeed that Plato can demand and no more than Aristotle approves) that there is somewhat of instinct in the poet? Do I thereby take away the being of an art in that kind? We know that Bezaleel is said to have the spirit of God, or an extraordinary instinct, in the curious skill of working in metals; yet, without doubt, instructions and practice (the necessary parents of all art) brought this disposition and inspired ability into actual perfection. Natalis Comes saith every excellent man in any quality (as Amphion in music) was called the child of Jupiter, because he had some more refinedness of nature, or some instinct above ordinary men. And the painter, in expressing the inward affections by the outward motions, wherein consisteth the grace and glory of his art, requires in the practiser ‘forza ingenerata seco e accresciuta con lui sino dalle fasce’, an inbred ability born and nursed in him even from his swaddlings; and this he calls a *fury* and saith it is reputed a divine gift, not a whit afraid to match it with the poetical fury. Yet I trust no artist is so overweeningly conceited that he will neglect those artificial directions which bring this natural propenseness and supernatural inspiring into actual and habitual perfection. These things considered, at length I securely conclude with courtly Horace, the skilfulliest and most naturally sweet lyric the Latins have, who saith:

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Natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte,
 quaesitum est: ego nec studium sine divite vena,
 nec rude quid prodest video ingenium: alterius sic
 altera poscit opem res et coniurat amice.

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Doubt is, if poets art or nature make;
 A reconcilment thus I undertake:
 No soil yields fruit without art's husbanding,
 No art makes barren minds rich harvest bring,
 But, art embracing nature, nature art,
 They sweetly work together, none apart.

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Only I will say it were best for those some of our undertakers, who Sir Philip Sidney saith can endure by no means to be cumbered with many artificial rules, still to defend that the poet needs no art, no nor