

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## PASSION AND IMAGINATION IN POETRY.

THE unsatisfactoriness of definitions of poetry arises usually from one or other of two causes. If the definition is that of a critic, it is the resultant of a long analytical process, and therefore not very intelligible apart from the process by which it has been arrived at; if it is the definition of a poet, it is certain to contain that element of poetry which it professes to explain. Nevertheless, the most helpful *aperçus* into poetry are those which the poets themselves have given us, and of them all none is more helpful than that inspired parenthesis in which Milton one day summed up its characteristics as “simple, sensuous, and passionate.”

B.

I

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## 2 *Passion and Imagination in Poetry.*

---

We may presume that by his first epithet Milton intended that simplicity which is another name for sincerity. He meant that a poet must look at the world frankly and with open eyes; with the spirit, though with more than the wisdom, of a child. We sometimes express another side of the same truth by saying that poetry is “universal,” meaning that it cares nothing for superficial and transient fashions, but is interested only “in man, in nature, and in human life,” in their permanent elements. This first epithet seems to fix beyond dispute an indispensable quality of all poetry. If a writer is insincere, or if he is conventional and fashionable, we are sure, whatever his airs and graces, that he is no poet. By “sensuous” it is probable that Milton meant what, in more technical language, we should describe as “concrete.” Poetry deals with things, and it deals with people; it sings of birds and flowers and stars; it sings of the wrath of Achilles, the wanderings of Ulysses and Æneas, the woes of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Passion and Imagination in Poetry.* 3

King Ædipus, the problems of Brutus and Hamlet; whatever be the thought or the emotion it is concerned with, it is concerned with them as operating on a particular occasion; it has no concern with the intellect or the emotions or the will in abstraction from this or that wise or passionate or wilful person<sup>1</sup>. By his third epithet Milton, as most will agree, touched, or almost touched, the heart of the matter. We all conceive prose to be an adequate vehicle for our level feelings, but as soon as we are deeply moved and wish to express our emotion we instinctively turn to the poets. Wordsworth is at one with Milton in fixing upon passion as

<sup>1</sup> The tradition of this concreteness was not lost even in the eighteenth century. Poets, living in a time of abstract thought, and feeling under the necessity of handling abstractions, hit upon the device of personifying them, with the result that from the pages of Dodsley's *Miscellany* every faculty of the mind and every operation of every science looks out at one with a capital letter, a fashion happily parodied in the famous line:

“Inoculation, heavenly maid, descend.”

Gray is not untouched with the malady, though, on the whole, he represents a reaction back to the richness of the concrete, the “pomp and prodigality” of Shakespeare and Milton.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 *Passion and Imagination in Poetry.*

---

of the essence of poetry, which he in one place defines as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” It does not matter for poetry what the emotion is that overflows; it may be love or hate, pity or fear, awe or indignation, joy or sorrow; what matters for poetry is that some passion there should be, for some particular object, and that it should be sincerely and deeply felt.

Essential, however, as passion is, so that where there is no passion there can be no poetry, in saying passion we have not said the last word. Anyone may prove this to himself by a simple reminiscence. He may at some time have been in love, for, according to Patmore, “Love wakes men once a lifetime each”; and, perhaps, in a mood of exaltation he may have taken pen and paper for a sonnet to his mistress’ eyebrow; but the poetry did not come; or, if something came, in a calmer mood he recognized that it was not poetry. Or we may illustrate from other passions. At the Queen’s

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*Passion and Imagination in Poetry.* 5

---

Jubilee a few years since we were all passionately loyal, and the morning newspapers vied with each other in producing odes ; but no one could mistake any one of them for poetry. Or, the other day, again, when the Rennes verdict was announced, the intelligence of England was roused to a passion of indignation. I took up my weekly gazette the next Saturday morning and found that indignation had made a good many verses, in none of which was there a tincture of poetry. There was much cursing and swearing, and appealing to Heaven for vengeance ; but the point of view was merely that of “the man in the street.”

These simple examples will suffice to show that poetry requires a manner of viewing things which is not that of the average man, but is individual to the poet ; it requires, in a word, genius. One could hardly expect Milton to point this out ; having genius himself he would assume that everyone else had genius ; he would assume that we all had the power of looking at

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 *Passion and Imagination in Poetry.*

---

the world not only *frankly* but *freshly*, because he would not understand any other way of looking at it. Now, it is this fresh outlook and insight, this power of viewing things and people out of the associations in which the rest of mankind habitually view them, that is the root of the whole matter. In the world of nature we find the poets moved even to passion by objects that we hardly notice, or from long familiarity have come to ignore. Their strong emotion arises from their fresh vision. By means of that fresh vision the world never ceases to be an interesting place to them.

“By the murmur of a spring,  
Or the least bough’s rustling,  
By a daisy whose leaves spread  
Shut when Titan goes to bed,  
Or a shady bush or tree,  
She could more infuse in me  
Than all Nature’s beauties can  
In some other wiser man.”

So sang Wither of the Poetic Muse; and Blake expresses the same truth in his inspired doggrel:

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*Passion and Imagination in Poetry.* 7

---

“What to others a trifle appears  
Fills me full of smiles and tears.”

The converse of the proposition also holds true: what to others may appear facts of the highest importance, may to the poet appear trifles. Similarly in the world of men we find the poets as much interested in the least as in the greatest, and we find them unconcerned by many of the distinctions which to mankind in general appear vital. We find, for example, Andrew Marvell introducing into his panegyric of Oliver Protector a picture of King Charles at his execution, which embalms the secret of all the cavalier loyalty, and is to-day the oftenest quoted passage of his poem.

The poet's subjects, then, are borrowed from any quarter in the whole range of nature and human experience; “the world is all before him where to choose”; anything that excites any deep emotion in him is a fit topic for his verse, and it is our privilege for the moment, so far as that one experience is concerned, to look

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## 8 *Passion and Imagination in Poetry.*

---

through his eyes. In this way the poets interpret the world to us. They also interpret us to ourselves. They make adventurous voyages into hitherto unsounded seas of the human spirit, and bring us word of their discoveries. And what they thus win becomes an inalienable possession to the race; the boundaries of humanity are pushed back. This power of interpreting the world and human life is sometimes spoken of as an idealizing faculty, and no exception can be taken to the term so long as it is not explained to mean that the poet tricks up what he sees in false lights in order to please us. For anyone who considers the best poetry, whether about the universe or man's heart,—and it is only the best that must determine the genus—will admit that, so far as he has trusted himself to it, it has convinced him of its entire veracity. It is idealized only in the sense that a landscape is idealized by the removal of the accidental and commonplace details, which sufficed to blind others to the beauty that



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Passion and Imagination in Poetry.* 9

---

the painter distinguished. The artist, poet or painter, sees the light that never was on sea or land until he saw it ; but when he has once seen it and shown it us, we can all see that it is there, and is not merely a figment of his fancy. This mode of viewing things, which by its freshness reveals, or interprets, or idealizes, is what is meant by Poetical Imagination.

But now that that most terrifying of technical terms has been mentioned, it may be well to make a short summary of the various senses in which the word is habitually employed, in order to observe what all or any, of them have in common, and how they connect one with another.

(a) When a psychologist speaks of imagination he is not thinking of poetry ; he means by the word the power of summoning again before the mind's eye vivid images of what has been once seen. He bids us look carefully at our breakfast-table, and then, closing our eyes, notice how much of it we can recall, how clear

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65491-4 - Two Lectures Introductory to the Study of Poetry

Rev. H. C. Beeching

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 *Passion and Imagination in Poetry.*

---

or dim an image. Whether skill in this memory-picturing has any link with poetical imagination it would be hard to say; certainly to no one would a power of vividly recalling images be of greater service. The faculty seems to be entirely distinct from the power of attention and close observation.

(*b*) A more familiar usage of the word is that which makes it almost a synonym for sympathy—the power of projecting self into the circumstances of others. We know to our cost that many men and women are sadly to seek in this faculty, and it seems to be no especial prerogative of poets, though Shelley thought so. He speaks of the poet as—

“A nerve o’er which do creep  
The else unfelt oppressions of the earth.”

And in his prose essay he says: “A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another, and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become