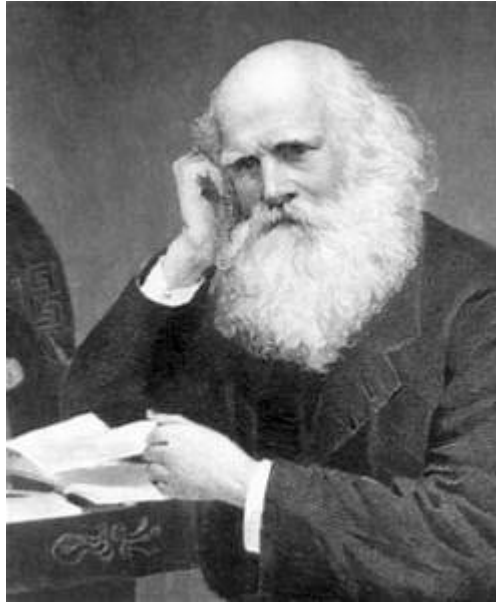


from "On the Nature of Poetry" (1826,1884)



William Cullen Bryant

(1794-1878)

*Italics* added for emphasis:

"...poetry, by the symbols of words, suggests both the sensible object and the association.... I would rather call poetry a suggestive art. Its power of affecting the *mind* is by pure suggestion... It is owing to its operation by means of suggestions that it affects different minds with such different degrees of force...

It is...to the very limitation of this power of language, as it seems to me, that Poetry owes her magic. The most detailed of her descriptions, which, by the way, are not always the most striking, are composed of a few touches; they are glimpses of things thrown into the mind; here and there a trace of the outline; here a gleam of light, and there a dash of shade. But these very touches act like a spell upon the *imagination* and awaken it to greater activity, and fill it, perhaps, with greater delight than the best defined objects could do. The *imagination* is the most active and the least susceptible of fatigue of all the faculties of the human mind; its more intense exercise is tremendous, and sometimes unsettles the *reason*; its repose only a gentle sort of activity; nor am I certain that it is ever quite unemployed, for even in our sleep it is still awake and busy, and amuses itself with fabricating our dreams. To this restless faculty--which is unsatisfied when the whole of its work is done to its hands, and which is ever wandering from the combination of ideas directly presented to it to other combinations of its own--it is the office of poetry to furnish the exercise in which it delights. Poetry is that art which selects and arranges the symbols of *thought* in such a manner as to excite it the most powerfully and delightfully....

There is no question that one principle office of poetry is to excite the *imagination*, but this is not its sole, nor perhaps its chief province; another of its ends is to touch the *heart*, and, as I expect to show in this lecture, it has something to do with the *understanding*. I know that some critics have made poetry to consist solely in the exercise of the *imagination*. They distinguish poetry from pathos. They talk of pure poetry, and by this phrase they mean passages of mere imagery, with the least possible infusion of human *emotion*. I do not know by what authority these gentlemen take the term poetry from the people, and thus limit its meaning.

In its ordinary acceptation, it has, in all ages and all countries, included something more. When we speak of a poem, we do not mean merely a tissue of striking images. The most beautiful poetry is that which takes the strongest hold of the *feelings*, and, if it is really the most beautiful, then it is poetry in the highest sense. Poetry is constantly resorting to the language of the *passions* to heighten the effect of her pictures... The truth is, that poetry which does not find its way to the *heart* is scarcely deserving of the name; it may be brilliant and ingenious, but it soon wearies the attention. The *feelings* and the *imagination*, when skillfully touched, act reciprocally on each other....

The language of *passion* is naturally figurative, but its figures are only employed to heighten the intensity of the expression; they are never introduced for their own sake. Important, therefore, as may be the office of the *imagination* in poetry, the great spring of poetry is *emotion*. It is this power that holds the key of the storehouse where the mind has laid up its images, and that alone can open it without violence. All the forms of fancy stand ever in its sight, ready to execute its bidding....*strong feeling is always a sure guide*. It rarely offends against good taste, because it instinctively chooses the most effectual means of communicating itself to others. It gives a variety to the composition it inspires, with which the severest taste is delighted. It may sometimes transgress arbitrary rules, or offend against local associations, but it speaks a language which reaches the *heart* in all countries and all times....

But poetry not only addresses the *passions* and the *imagination*; it appeals to the *understanding* also. So far as this position relates to the principles of taste which lie at the foundation of all poetry, and by which its merits are tried, I believe its truth will not be doubted. These principles have their origin in the *reason* of things, and are investigated and applied by the *judgment*. True it is that they may be observed by one who has never speculated about them, but it is no less true that their observance always gratifies the *understanding* with the fitness, the symmetry, and the congruity it produces. To write fine poetry requires intellectual faculties of the highest order, and among these, not the least important, is the faculty of *reason*. Poetry is the worst mask in the world behind which folly and stupidity could attempt to hide their features. Fitter, safer, and more congenial to them is the solemn discussion of unprofitable questions. Any obtuseness of apprehension or incapacity for drawing conclusions, which shows a deficiency or want of cultivation of the *reasoning power*, is sure to expose the unfortunate poet to contempt and ridicule.

But there is another point of view in which poetry may be said to address the *understanding*--I mean in the direct lessons of wisdom that it delivers. Remember that it does not concern itself with abstract reasonings, nor with any course of investigation that fatigues the mind. Nor is it merely didactic; but this does not prevent it from teaching truths which the mind instinctively acknowledges. The elements of moral truth are few and simple, but their combinations with human actions are as innumerable and diversified as the combinations of language.... Nor are these [truths] of less value because they require no laborious research to discover them. The best riches of the earth are produced on its surface, and we need no reasoning to teach us the folly of a people who should leave its harvest ungathered to dig for its ores....

I call these passages poetry [from Shakespeare, Milton and Cowper], because the mind instantly acknowledges their truth and *feels* their force, and is moved and filled and elevated by them. Nor does poetry refuse to carry on a sort of process of *reasoning* by deducing one truth from another. Her demonstrations differ, however, from ordinary ones by requiring that each step should be in itself beautiful or striking, and that they all should carry the mind to the final conclusion without the consciousness of labor... Eloquence is the poetry of prose; poetry is the eloquence of verse...by eloquence I understand those appeals to our moral perceptions that produce *emotion* as soon as they are uttered. It is in these that the orator is himself affected with the *feelings* he would communicate, that his eyes glisten, and his frame seems to dilate, and his voice acquires an unwonted melody, and his sentences arrange themselves into a sort of measure and harmony, and the listener is chained in involuntary and breathless attention. This is the enthusiasm that is the parent of poetry.