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Fletcher with his adoration of scenic beauty, and H. D. with her virginal innocence of civilization, her Greek kinship with the early gods?

Europe or the wilderness?—the choice will become more and more urgent for our seers of visions.

Twenty years ago I travelled from Italy to Arizona, and to my profound surprise found Arizona the bigger thing of the two. It is not unlikely that after this War which is to make the whole world wise, American art, American poetry, will have the same illuminating experience.

Search not in cities for the Pierian spring! H. M.

POETRY AS AN ART

It may sound exaggerated, yet it is true, that people are more interested in art than in anything else in life. All that we need and crave for, above the mere protection and maintenance of our bodies, can be reduced to art needs. It is some sense of form—of balance, harmony, decoration—which makes our clothes, our furniture, our houses, what they are. We work for this and we go to war for this. It is true of rich and poor, of the civilized man and the savage.

The human mind finds nature and its own existence beyond and above its own proud self. Even the most practical man sitting in his office has moments in which he is haunted, consciously or subconsciously, by what we can not but call the mystery of life. On this brink, reached in
a flash, the human mind totters; it is seeking for support. In art it finds a refuge and a ballast. To this is due its religious cravings, its feeling for harmony, even its desire for display. It would fall all in a heap without these. Knowledge, discovery—the mind gently scoffs at these. It is in art that there is a real grip—a hold and a rest—for the abeyance of being.

In two ways it finds assuagement. One way is music, in which is a spurring excitement and comfort at the same time. The other way is, to put it very crudely, explanation of at least a part of the haunting mystery—interpretation. Rhythm in other arts is music received through the eyes instead of through the ear. To these—rhythm and interpretation, separated or combined—all art forms can be reduced. In a painted landscape whatever is not rhythm is interpretation of life. The same is true of a portrait. What there is in it of the photographic is desecration of life; since it is impossible to render in any medium the thousand qualities pregnant in reality, any rendering not imbued with the reverential spirits of rhythm and interpretation is deadly and treacherous. This is also true of idealization, which usually means a sentimental rendering. In addition to being superficial it is also false—bad photography.

Rhythm and interpretation then are the only important art-qualities. In a certain work of art the one or the other may predominate. But interpretation, to be art, must be extremely simplified. Through simplification interpr-
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tation becomes an art-language. In concentrating on the subject, and in cutting away all but what is absolutely and directly needed for the interpretation, lies the function of art. Whatever is more than this serves only to show the artisan's so-called skill, which in reality is just the opposite of skill. In spite of what art-critics may usually entitle it, it is merely rhetoric, padding, ranting, etc.—not art.

The Egyptian figure El Beled might be taken as an example of interpretation. It might appear mere realism if superficially observed. But the sculptor knew his subject with a sort of god-like knowledge, and he spun from the depth and strength of his knowledge. I would say played with it, but the word play is usually misunderstood; true play is extremely serious. The sculptor of the great Chephron ennobled his subject—idealized it. This was entirely different from our modern way; when we idealize we are more or less deceitful. There is no real attainment of depth. The artist's brain is either too lazy or shallow, or he is content to bank on the observer's shallowness or laziness.

Rhythm as an art-element is above interpretation, just as interpretation is above didacticism or photography. But being human, with immediate human needs, it is hard for us to believe that rhythm is a greater art-need than interpretation, or even than the various forms of photography—didactic detail, etc.

The recent revolution in the other arts which is divesting them of the various forms of the photographic—didactic,
story, pseudo-rhythm—has had its effect also on poetry. Yet owing to certain peculiarities in the nature of poetry, the modern poet, unlike the other artist, has very few models.

Words being so closely associated with immediate human needs, it is always hard for the poet to escape from these to the greater needs of the human spirit. It is true that even the greatest of the ancient works of art were not entirely free from these influences; still, if the Assyrian man-headed lion or bull had a taint of the didactic, the artist succeeded in melting it almost completely in rhythm. The Egyptians, who did not always bother with rhythm as such, have succeeded in giving us the most perfect interpretive art imaginable. One can see that readily in Thouveris, the statuette representing maternity, and more or less readily in most of their best work. In the early Chinese sculpture, we find a pure and tender handling of reality combined with simplification. In the Hindu art the imagination rambles freely. In the American aboriginal art, we find a noble symbolism; and extreme simplification, not only of the human being, but of almost everything in nature. Rhythm is to be found in most of these, and is predominant in Assyrian art, in Hittite art, and, in a simple or complex form, in Chinese and Japanese paintings.

In poetry the art-quality was less present. Greek poetry was effected by outer elements—nationalistic, philosophic, etc.—which are not pure art-elements. This is true of other ancient poetry.
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Reluctant as one may be to admit this, the ardent expression of emotion is not art—it is generally a form of photography. It is only when it is interpretive and combined with simplification, or when the imagination, as it were, melts it and forms something grotesque or fantastic, that it becomes the spirit-food called art. It is only in rare cases, when the poet’s soul is very gentle and childlike, that the mere expression of personal moods forms art: in Catullus, Villon, and to a lesser degree in Burns, Keats, Heine, the moods reveal to us something surprising and fresh—are interpretive.

The better models for the modern poet are the ancient sculptors or oriental painters, as the art elements in them are purer and more readily discernible. He should learn from them to simplify his subject, or to idealize it in the pure and genuine way they did. He should learn from them what true idealization is, in order to avoid the pseudo, the shallow, the sentimental, the vulgar and the stupid, all often mistaken among us for idealization.

As for the rhythm of words, the words in poetry must be as if born together with the rhythm. But the reader must learn to distinguish between sing-song or rag-time rhythm, and deep, pure rhythm. It can be laid down almost as a rule that a rhythm that carries the reader too strongly is bad. It will be found to be poor through monotony, and through lack of control. One will usually find the same symptoms in the ideas of the poem.

The poet should remember that there is much good and
bad verse, and that humanity can bear waiting till his work is ripe in every sense of the word.

Max Michelson

THE SIXTEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH

There is need in many quarters to-day, as is invariably the case in a war era, for a defense of the avocation of poesy. That which isn’t active in the light of the outer eye must be ostracized, says your hot-headed citizen, devoid of that vision of the inner which sees warfare as a material combat brought on by spiritual forces, among which that supreme lover of liberty, the poet, is, as any mere history demonstrates, a generalissimo. For the benefit of the street-corner or parliamentary soap-box braggart who sneers at the parchment-faced beauty-priest doing his quiet and presumably innocuous work in the dark of privacy, one might stretch forth a list of the poets now dead, wounded or still engaged on the European battleground; or, for his still larger benefit, one might cite the works which these men and countless others before them have contributed—works which, more than any impassioned outburst in legislatures, have kept liberty driving, digging, scrambling and climbing against and conquering its enemies. In modern times one has only to breathe the single name and the multifarious performances, public as well as personal, of Walt Whitman. However, since it is necessary to bring the achievement of the past to substantiate the ideals and theories of the present against opponents who are always skeptical un-