# Whistler and the 'Poetry' of Pictures

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Painting is … no satellite of literature, but it is the natural minister of poetry. The act of vision is complicated by every element of thought and feeling and breeding, as well as of sense, that makes the impression of the retina a refusal and a choice, a joke, a judgement, or a dream.[1]

IN A WELL-KNOWN REVIEW OF 1862, Charles Baudelaire recorded his pleasure at viewing Whistler's Thames etchings, shown some months earlier at Martinet's gallery in Paris. The etchings, he wrote, were

> as subtle and lively as improvisation … a wonderful tangle of rigging, yard-arms, and rope; a chaos of fog, furnaces, and corkscrews of smoke; the profound and intricate poetry of a vast capital.[2]

One might expect an ambitious young artist would have been gratified by this admiring notice from so influential a taste-maker. Not Whistler. As he complained to his friend, the painter Fantin-Latour, 'Baudelaire said many poetic things about the Thames and nothing about the etchings themselves'.[3] It is a complaint that Whistler would reprise, and elaborate, in his landmark 'Ten O'Clock' lecture more than two decades later. 'For some time past', Whistler observed,

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> the unattached writer has become the middleman in this matter of Art, and his influence, while it has widened the gulf between the people and the painter, has brought about the most complete misunderstanding as to the aim of the picture.
>
> For him a picture is more or less a hieroglyph or symbol of story. Apart from a few technical terms, for the display of which he finds an occasion, the work is considered absolutely from a literary point of view; indeed, from what other can he consider it? And in his essays he deals with it as with a novel – a history – or an anecdote.[4]

So far so familiar, for students of Whistler: here we have a forceful expression of the artist's renowned antipathy to narrative in painting and to the narrativising impulse of Victorian art criticism, which, as Elizabeth Prettejohn observes, '"educated" its readers to respond emotionally to the picture's narrative and moral implications, not to evaluate its visual or formal qualities'.[5] What is surprising about Whistler's polemic, and what has gone largely unremarked, is the way in which the artist appeals to another literary kind – poetry – to describe the true source of a picture's value and distinctiveness. Moreover, this was not an isolated instance but a move Whistler employed at other crucial moments throughout his combative writings. As he continues in the lecture,

> The thoughts emphasised, noble or other, are inevitably attached to the incident, and become more or less noble, according to the eloquence or mental quality of the writer ... He finds poetry where he would feel it were he himself transcribing the event, invention in the intricacy of the *mise en scène*, and noble philosophy in some detail of philanthropy, courage, modesty, or virtue, suggested to him by the occurrence.
>
> All this might be brought before him, and his imagination appealed to, by a very poor picture – indeed, I might safely say that it generally is.
>
> Meanwhile, the *painter*'s poetry is quite lost to him – the amazing invention that shall have put form and colour into

> such perfect harmony, that exquisiteness is the result, he is without understanding – the nobility of thought, that shall have given the artist's dignity to the whole, says to him absolutely nothing. (pp. 147-8)

These remarks suggest why Whistler found Baudelaire's comment about the Thames etchings so provoking. Indeed, the striking echo of Baudelaire's language of poetry and intricacy[6] – across a distance of more than twenty years – suggests Whistler's defence of his own art was deeply shaped by the terms of Baudelaire's criticism. The French poet may not have attempted to tell a story, exactly, about the etchings, but his observations still peered through Whistler's artwork to the urban scene which occasioned it, a scene which Baudelaire took as an opportunity for his own poetic description of the *mise-en-scène*. Baudelaire quite literally finds poetry – 'the profound and intricate poetry of a vast capital' – where he would have felt it were he himself transcribing the event. And so, for Whistler, he missed everything that distinguished this particular picture from countless other ways of portraying the same scene. And yet, rather than disavowing the 'poetry' of pictures, Whistler tells us that the critic has simply been looking for it in the wrong place.

Whistler had used the term 'poetry' in a similarly approving way in the interview he gave to the society magazine *The World* in May 1878: between the publication of Ruskin's notorious attack on *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* and the sensational libel trial which followed. In these pages, Linda Merrill observes, Whistler 'gave the first public explanation of his style', and here too 'poetry' emerges as an essential term in Whistler's public defence of his aesthetic programme and artistic practice. 'He insists', wrote the interviewer, 'that as music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and that the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour'.[7] When Whistler came to repurpose this article (under the title 'The Red Rag') for his annotated scrapbook of critical hostilities, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890), the implicit antagonism between 'poetry' and 'subject-matter' was made more prominent by its position within the wider argument and by the grammatical alterations which converted

Whistler's remarks from third to first person. As a result, 'and' no longer merely sounds like the interviewer's breezy way of stringing together some juicy *bons mots*, but resounds with the force of logical consequence, as in the sentence which comes before:

> . . . the picture should have its own merit, and not depend upon dramatic, or legendary, or local interest.
>
> As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour.[8]

Whistler's barrister, John Humffreys Parry, paraphrased this point (presumably at Whistler's instruction) at the end of his summing up of the plaintiff's case in the trial:

> As to the peculiarities in the titles selected by Mr Whistler, it has been suggested that he was making an attempt to show an analogy between music and painting. There is some analogy, for music is the poetry of the ear, while painting is the poetry of the eye; and if Mr Whistler has made that discovery, he is not to be condemned. Taking the whole mass of evidence, I think it would be impossible to say that Mr Ruskin's was a fair criticism.[9]

The climactic placement of this point within the legal arguments advanced on Whistler's behalf suggests not only its importance to Whistler's thinking but also the effect which his legal representatives thought it would have on the jury. In 'The Red Rag', just as in the 'Ten O'Clock' lecture, 'poetry' is seemingly allied with 'harmony'; but if the musical analogy were sufficient, why speak of poetry at all? If the fundamental principle of Whistler's aesthetics is that music is the archetype of art, then why does poetry keep reappearing as a touchstone of value in his writing? By reconstructing the various discursive contexts in which 'poetry' was put to use in nineteenth century aesthetics and art and literary criticism, we can perhaps begin to understand what poetry meant to Whistler and why it mattered. Scholars in recent years have done much to illuminate Whistler's connections with particular poems and poets, especially those

associated with the Decadent movement: Gautier, Poe, Baudelaire, Swinburne, Mallarmé, Henley, Symons.[10] My enterprise is different, both in placing Whistler within a longer trajectory of cultural traditions and in turning attention towards the meaning of 'poetry' itself, as a quality or ideal – the way he uses it in the examples above.

The key to understanding Whistler's appropriation of the term 'poetry' lies in appreciating the ways in which its meaning was pulled in two directions over the course of the nineteenth century, with the effect that its range both widened and narrowed in significant ways. On the one hand, 'poetry' came more and more to stand for the products of any kind of significant creative activity, as it became increasingly abstracted from the specific craft of verse-making. On the other hand, 'poetry' as a literary category was subject to a process which critics in recent years have dubbed 'lyricisation', that is, the increasing identification of poetry with lyric, and its increasing dissociation from narrative and dramatic modes. The most influential accounts of this process are those given by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, but whereas these critics use the term pejoratively, to denote a crude and historically naive method of reading poetry, I intend no such judgement.[11] The triumph of lyric within the realms of verse also had an influential role in how 'poetry' was applied in the wider, abstract sense: this can be seen from the way in which Whistler readily opposes 'poetry' to both 'story' and the 'dramatic' in the examples above. But the relations between art and literary criticism were even more entangled than this might suggest: it was by considering what makes a picture poetic that some of the most influential *literary* critics expounded and developed their thinking about poetry.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* testifies to the newly elastic definition 'poetry' had acquired by the early nineteenth century. Here is sense 2e in the entry for 'poetry': 'In extended use: creative or imaginative art in general. *Obsolete*'.[12] The *OED* identifies the first instance of this usage in English in Dugald Stewart's supplement to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1815. Stewart writes:

> The latitude given by D'Alembert to the meaning of the word *Poetry* is a real and very important improvement on Bacon, who restricts it to fictitious History or Fables … D'Alembert, on the other hand, employs it in its natural signification, as synonymous with *invention* or *creation*.[13]

This broad definition, rooted in poetry's etymological derivation from the Greek verb *poiein* – to make – was embraced by Romantic poets including Coleridge, who carefully distinguished the formal characteristics and distinctive aims of 'a poem' from the broader quality of 'poetry'; Coleridge reasons that, as 'poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem', so 'a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be, all poetry'.[14] Shelley, meanwhile, insisted that 'the instruments and materials of poetry' – in 'the most universal sense of the word' – included not just 'language' but 'colour', 'form', and even 'religious and civil habits of action'.[15] It was this tradition that John Stuart Mill was drawing on in 1833 when he bemoaned the 'wretched mockery of a definition' that 'confounds poetry with metrical composition', arguing not only that poetry 'may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse' but that it 'can speak through those other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones, which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture'.[16]

This expansion of poetry's precincts was not without its critics. In his essay 'On Poetry in General' (1818), William Hazlitt objected to such loose talk on the grounds that it eroded poetry's claims to distinction:

> We may assume, without much temerity, that poetry is more poetical than painting. When artists or connoisseurs talk on stilts about the poetry of painting, they show that they know little about poetry, and have little love for the art. Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies … painting gives the event, poetry the progress of events: but it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the

> highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of the interest lies.[17]

Hazlitt's contrast closely resembles Lessing's influential argument in the *Laocöon* (1766) that poetry and painting are incommensurable on account of their fundamentally different relations to time and space, but, as we shall see, he was not averse to talking of the poetry of painting himself.[18]

The expanded definition of 'poetry' may have been relatively novel in the nineteenth century, but paintings had long been described as 'poetic', even if this flipped version of Horace's ancient analogy – *ut pictura poesis* – was never as popular or influential as claims made for painterly or pictorial qualities in poems. Titian may have classified a specific group of his paintings as *poesie*, but the poetic qualities of painting tended to be framed in much broader terms throughout the early modern period and beyond.[19] As the art historian Rensselaer W. Lee explained in a seminal discussion of the subject, 'the humanistic theory of painting in European criticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . is everywhere pervaded and molded by the direct or implied comparison of painting with poetry'.[20] This comparison functions at quite a high level of generality, in ways that prepare the ground for the more abstract definitions of poetry popular in the early nineteenth century:

> If the painter's inventions were to be comparable to those of the poet in power, depth, or beauty, he must choose themes from ancient and modern poetry, and from history sacred and profane; his genius was said to have its most intimate affinities with the poet's in his power to express human emotion; his aim like the poet's was assumed to be serious, for he must aspire not merely to give pleasure, but to impart wisdom to mankind.[21]

What Lee observes in the work of Dolce, Vasari, Lomazzo, and other Italian Renaissance critics was part of the effort to raise painting to the dignity of a liberal art by foregrounding the artist's powers of conception and invention over his merely mechanical powers of execution. Sir Joshua Reynolds could rely

upon the weight of this tradition in declaiming that 'nobleness of conception' was 'that one great idea which gives to painting its true dignity' and 'entitles it to the name of a Liberal Art, and ranks it as a sister of poetry'.[22] Discussing Raphael's Cartoons, he even proposes renaming the pre-eminent genre to which they belong – history painting – in view of the way its adepts 'conceive and represent their subjects in a poetical manner, not confined to mere matter of fact': 'In conformity to custom I call this part of the art History Painting; it ought to be called Poetical, as in reality it is' (pp. 59, 60). For Reynolds, then, 'poetical' painting was not distinguished in terms of subject-matter from historical or narrative painting – why should it be, since the most esteemed form of poetry was the narrative art of epic? Rather, history painting could be said to *become* poetical precisely when it fulfilled its own high promise. The hallmarks of such poetical painting were imaginative grandeur, vigour, and boldness, as epitomised in the art of Michelangelo, whose 'daring spirit' led him to 'carry painting into the regions of poetry, and to emulate that art in its most adventurous flights' (pp. 272-3).

Given the way Reynolds extols such 'poetical' exploits, Major Whistler's choice of the *Discourses* as a Christmas gift for his 15-year-old son may have been ill advised, for it was just this aspect of the lad's passion for the arts that gave him cause for concern:[23]

> You cannot go amiss with industry in pursuit of good habits of method, and the study of any branch of Education – your natural inclination of taste for the fine arts – if it is not allowed to become too poetical, will certainly be of much service to you in any profession connected with the arts and sciences.[24]

Whistler senior hoped that a training in the fine arts would make his son disciplined and industrious, not a visionary genius. Yet while Reynolds certainly upheld the importance of technical proficiency, his elevation of 'poetry' as the quality that separated great painting from the merely correct would not have escaped young James's notice.

It was precisely by thinking through Reynolds's ideas that Whistler's great antagonist, John Ruskin, would develop his own approach to the question of what made painting poetic. Dissatisfied with Reynolds's analysis, which seemed to ally poetry too neatly with the ideal and the general against the natural and the particular, Ruskin, like many of his contemporaries, found himself asking the question 'What is poetry?' with renewed vigour:

> It seems to me, and may seem to the reader, strange that we should need to ask the question, 'What is poetry?' Here is a word we have been using all our lives, and, I suppose, with a very distinct idea attached to it; and when I am now called upon to give a definition of this idea, I find myself at a pause. What is more singular, I do not at present recollect hearing the question often asked, though surely it is a very natural one; and I *never* recollect hearing it answered, or even attempted to be answered.[25]

Ruskin's answer, which arises in dialogue with Reynolds's 1759 essays on painting for *The Idler*, is developed in the early chapters of *Modern Painters III* (1856). Like Coleridge, Shelley, and Mill before him, Ruskin criticises 'the careless and illogical custom of opposing painting to poetry': 'Painting', he argues,

> is properly to be opposed to *speaking* or *writing*, but not to *poetry*. Both painting and speaking are methods of expression. Poetry is the employment of either for the noblest purposes. (p. 31)

The definition which Ruskin then unfolds has two primary aspects, both of which offer to shed light on Whistler's appeal to the 'poetry' of his pictures.

First, he proposes that 'poetry is "the suggestion, by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions"' (p. 31). Ruskin's use of speech marks is eccentric: they evidently do not signify that he is quoting someone else (or indeed himself); perhaps, like Arnold's and Pater's recourse to italics, they betray an aspiration to be quoted by others. Ruskin in fact goes on to quote these words on multiple subsequent occasions in *Modern*

*Painters*. Here, he goes on to list the various emotions he has in mind (Love, Veneration, Admiration, Joy – and their opposites), before offering some rather tendentious examples of what does and does not constitute 'noble' grounds for them. Flowers do – fireworks, significantly, do not:

> energetic admiration may be excited in certain minds by a display of fireworks … but the feeling is not poetical, because the grounds of it are false, and therefore ignoble. There is in reality nothing to deserve admiration … in the firing of packets of gunpowder … But admiration excited by the budding of a flower is a poetical feeling, because it is impossible that this manifestation of spiritual power and vital beauty can ever be enough admired. (p. 29)

Whistler's choice to depict a firework in *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* was not much at issue during the 1878 libel trial, because it played no obvious part in Ruskin's criticism of the painting – though William Michael Rossetti did take the occasion to tell the jury, 'There is no reason why fireworks should not be represented – I have seen them represented before in pictures – but I do not think it is a good subject'.[26] It is nonetheless strange that, in all the discussion of this celebrated cultural flashpoint, no one (so far as I am aware) has drawn attention to Ruskin's previously articulated disparagement of the picture's ostensible subject. Insofar as commentators on the trial have addressed the subject of the picture at all, they have tended to point out that the setting, Cremorne Gardens, was notorious as a site of prostitution: Clive Wilmer, for example, suggests this may have contributed to Ruskin's disquiet about the picture.[27] Ruskin's own defence counsel made waggish allusion to Cremorne's reputation during the trial: 'Passing to the Cremorne nocturne, I do not know what the ladies would say to that, because it has a subject they would not understand – I hope they have never been to Cremorne – (*Laughter*) – but men will know more about it'.[28]

Ruskin's remarks in *Modern Painters* hint at a suggestive analogy between his observation that fireworks rely upon 'false' grounds for admiration – because they are manufactured,

because they are flashy, because they suggest no moral or spiritual ideas – and his reasons for objecting to Whistler's picture. As Ruskin explained in the memorandum of instruction he provided to his legal team (later revised and published posthumously as 'My Own Article on Whistler'), the 'essential ground of the present action' was 'the confusion between art and manufacture':

> it is a critic's first duty in examining designs proposed in public exhibitions to distinguish the artist's work from the upholsterer's … and … he may yet, without severity of exaction, require of a young painter that he should show the resources of his mind no less than the dexterity of his fingers.[29]

The point at issue is precisely the claim of painting to the status of a liberal art which Reynolds and his Renaissance predecessors had laboured so hard to establish, and which Ruskin thought was threatened by commercial culture. In *Modern Painters*, it is a question of painting's warrant to the name of poetry.

The second necessary condition Ruskin identifies for this entitlement follows from this emphasis on the painter's powers of conception and invention. For Ruskin is careful to say that 'Poetical feeling', in and of itself, 'is not poetry'. Rather, it is 'the power of assembling, by *the help of the imagination*, such images as will excite these feelings' that is 'the power of the poet or literally of the "Maker"' (p. 29). Thus it is not enough for the painter to furnish noble grounds for noble emotions – he must 'furnish these grounds by *imaginative power*'. That is, his pictures must be exercises in 'INVENTION', which is '[t]he last characteristic of great art'.[30] In *Modern Painters V* (1860), Ruskin reflects that his readers 'may be surprised at my giving so high a place to invention', but insists that it is 'not only the highest quality of art, but … pre-eminently the deed of human creation; ποίησις, otherwise, poetry'.[31] Samuel Johnson had established one of the pithiest and most influential definitions of poetry in the previous century when he declared, in his *Lives of the Poets*, that 'The essence of poetry is invention'.[32] Ruskin

makes it the *sine qua non* and the *ne plus ultra* of what constitutes poetry in paint.

Returning to Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock' lecture, what is striking is the way in which Whistler's language vibrates with Ruskinian overtones. Elizabeth Prettejohn has written of Whistler's talismanic phrase 'the *painter*'s poetry' that '[h]e does not clearly define what that might imply – but how could he? To put it into words would be a contradiction in terms'.[33] Prettejohn's point, very properly, is that Whistler wishes to emphasise those qualities which are unique to his medium; yet rather than leaving this gnomic phrase to resonate as it may, Whistler constructs a series of appositive clauses which elaborate, if they do not necessarily elucidate, his meaning. And the leading terms of those clauses – poetry, invention, nobility – had all been refined in Ruskin's fire:

> Meanwhile the *painter*'s poetry is quite lost to him – the amazing invention that shall have put form and colour into such perfect harmony, that exquisiteness is the result, he is without understanding – the nobility of thought, that shall have given the artist's dignity to the whole, says to him absolutely nothing. (pp. 147-8)

In the wake of Whistler's pyrrhic victory in the libel trial (though he won the case, he was awarded only a farthing in damages and was bankrupted by legal costs), was he deliberately using Ruskin's own favoured terminology against him? The effect seems frankly too understated for Whistler's strutting style of wit. It is more likely that Whistler was simply using the vocabulary available to him in a culture which had so thoroughly absorbed Ruskin's language and thinking as to render its debts to him all but invisible. There is certainly an irony to be savoured if so.

As I have said, Ruskin shared with Reynolds the premise that the greatest painting was that which could justify its claim to poetry, and he developed a more precise account of what that entailed. Ruskin's avowal that 'I do not … insist on the distinction between historical and poetical painting, because … all great painting must be both' may also seem to echo Reynolds's

desire to relabel 'History-painting' as 'Poetical' (pp. 59, 60).[34] Yet he immediately qualifies it such as to unsettle Academical assumptions about the hierarchy of genres, and to toy with the idea of the distinction he has only just dismissed. 'Nevertheless', Ruskin writes,

> a certain distinction must generally exist between men who, like Horace Vernet, David, or Domenico Tintoret, would employ themselves in painting, more or less graphically, the outward verities of passing events – battles, councils, etc. – of their day (who, supposing them to work worthily of their mission, would become, properly so called, historical or narrative painters); and men who sought, in scenes of perhaps less outward importance, 'noble grounds for noble emotions;' – who would be, in a certain separate sense, *poetical* painters, some of them taking for subjects events which had actually happened, and others themes from the poets; or, better still, becoming poets themselves in the entire sense, and inventing the story as they painted it. (pp. 126-7)

'In a certain separate sense': it is a vague and finicky formulation by which Ruskin tiptoes towards the conclusion that poetical painting need not be 'historical' in the traditional sense at all, that is, need not pursue the 'outward' grandeur of subject which Reynolds thought essential to the highest art. Yet while he may have been prepared to unshackle poetry from historical subject-matter, Ruskin did little to disturb the close association between poetry and narrative in painting: 'becoming poets in … the entire sense' (p. 127) amounts to inventing a story – his examples are Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* and Millais's *Huguenot*.

Indeed, for many distinguished critics before and after his example, poetry (whatever else it may have meant) meant story. William Hazlitt in 1821: 'Poussin was, of all painters, the most poetical … No one ever told a story half so well'.[35] And more surprisingly, Walter Pater on Botticelli, fifty years later: 'He is before all things a poetical painter, blending the charm of story and sentiment, the medium of the art of poetry, with the charm

of line and colour'.[36] Poetry, here, is sharply distinguished from the formal, visual properties of the picture: 'poetical painter', in this essay of 1870, means a painter who poetises (by appealing to story and sentiment), not a poet who makes paint his expressive medium. Paul Mantz was using 'poetry' in this way when he reviewed Whistler's *The White Girl* at the Paris Salon of 1863:

> Mr Whistler's picture does not contain merely an association of tones which possibly will seduce only sophisticates; it also has a poetry of its own. Whence comes this white apparition? What does she want from us with her dishevelled hair, her great eyes swimming in ecstasy, her languid pose and that petal-less flower in the fingers of her trailing hand?[37]

For Mantz, the poetry of the picture is precisely not a matter of its formal properties; it lies in the charm of story and sentiment. Examples such as these suggest the risk Whistler was running in adopting 'poetry' as a key term in his aesthetics; if his mission was to destroy the misprision that a picture was 'a hieroglyph or symbol of story' it seems, on the face of it, an extremely odd choice of rhetorical weapon.

Whistler's choice seems less eccentric, if no less daring, when we consider the ways in which other writers had begun to untether the 'poetry' of painting from narrative content. As early as 1809, the Royal Academician Prince Hoare liberally acknowledged that the house of 'graphic poetry' had many mansions: from the 'epic' and the 'allegorical' to the 'symbolical or allusive', from the 'dramatic' poetry of Raphael's Cartoons to the 'poetry of Landscape'.[38] So various are the paths by which, Hoare discovers, painting 'ascends to take its station in the regions of poetry' that he is brought to the belated admission that 'It is not within the scope of this paper to enumerate all the various painters who lay claim to the character of poets, or to describe individually the mode of poetry, which distinguishes the style of each'.[38] In the following decade, the fine arts critic for *The Examiner* seemed to go further and drive a wedge between 'Narrative' and 'Poetry' altogether, opining that

> Painting, with its many subdivisions, may be classed under three heads, Portraiture, History or Narrative, and Poetry. Portraiture gives the form and colour of objects; History the public and private transactions of mankind; Poetry a selection of the choicest objects, with an intensity that delights the imagination by their beauty, their sublimity or their novelty.[39]

It is clear from his ensuing descriptions of particular pictures, however, that narrative (and even historical) paintings were among those he considered to fall under the bracket of 'Poetry', such as Turner's *Field of Waterloo*. For this critic, as for Hoare, poetic paintings *could* be historical or narrative, although unlike for Reynolds, they *need* not be.

As has long been recognised, poetry's association with narrative weakened by fits and starts over the course of the nineteenth century, so much so that lyric – characterised above all by its distinction from narrative and by its association with first-person feeling – eventually came to be regarded as the archetype of poetry *per se*, although it would take until the twentieth century for this transformation to establish itself securely. As Virginia Jackson puts it, 'The lyric was gradually transformed from an idea attached to various verse genres into an aesthetic ideal that eclipsed or embraced other verse genres' such that '*lyric* and *poetry* began to be synonymous terms'.[40] M. H. Abrams long ago noted that one consequence of early developments in this direction during the Romantic period was that, 'In place of painting, music becomes the art frequently pointed to as having a profound affinity with poetry'.[41] But how did this change affect discussion of the 'poetry' of *pictures*?

For at least one of the key thinkers responsible for lyricisation, G. W. F. Hegel, it meant such talk was misplaced:

> When it comes to inwardness, painting too takes a back seat to the art of poetry. As internally self-moving, what is inward can be explicated only by the poetic art. Inwardness is the lyrical element of sensibility. When painting ventures into what is lyrical, it misunderstands its own medium. People often talk a lot about the poetry of painting, but

> speaking this way is simply unsatisfactory and is a mistake.[42]

These observations come from Karol Libelt's transcription of Hegel's last lectures on aesthetics, given in Berlin in 1828-29. Hegel's more well-known remarks, from the version of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* published in 1835, suggest why he took this line:

> poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings.[43]

John Stuart Mill drew a very different conclusion about the poetry of painting while setting out from similar premises to Hegel's. As he argued in his 1833 essay 'What Is Poetry?', the distinguishing characteristic of poetry was 'the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of human emotion', the 'contemplation of the world within' rather than the depiction of 'mere outward circumstances' (p. 345).

Mill famously frames this distinction in two ways: poetry is defined firstly against narrative, and secondly against eloquence. For Mill, 'there is a radical distinction between the interest felt in a story as such, and the interest excited by poetry; for the one is derived from incident, the other from the representation of feeling' (p. 344). Not only are poetry and narrative conceived as independent of each other, but the 'two sources of interest correspond to two distinct, and … mutually exclusive, characters of mind' (p. 345). They *may* be combined in the same work, Mill reflects, but only in the manner of 'oil and vinegar': they can coexist, but they can never fuse (p. 346). Mill follows Lessing in claiming that 'The narrative powers of painting are extremely limited' because of the stillness and silence of the medium (p. 353). 'The power of painting', he insists, 'lies in poetry', but in order to define this quality adequately he must distinguish it further from eloquence (p. 346). 'The distinction between poetry and eloquence appears to us to be equally

fundamental with the distinction between poetry and narrative', Mill writes:

> Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude … Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action. (pp. 348-9)

Mill then develops this antithesis in a discussion of visual art, which excites him to vehement condemnation of French neoclassical painters such as Jacques-Louis David, for their 'rant[ing]' and 'attitudiniz[ing]': 'Every figure in French painting or statuary seems to be showing itself off before spectators: they are in the worst style of corrupted eloquence, but in no style of poetry at all' (p. 353). This distinction of poetry from oratory – art with overt moral and political designs – would prove congenial to the nascent movement of 'art for art's sake', then merely a glint in the eye of Poe, Gautier, and Baudelaire. Indeed, when Mill is forced at length to provide a positive definition of poetry in painting, his examples are art which has for its 'direct aim … the production of the *beautiful*', and he points to the landscapes of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa as examples. Curiously, Mill deleted this passage from his text in its entirety when he prepared it for publication in book form in 1859 (was he perhaps embarrassed by the association I am suggesting with *l'art pour l'art*?).[44] This is the version which modern editions and anthologies invariably reproduce, which is perhaps why the discussion has attracted so little comment. Whatever may have been Mill's second thoughts, however, within the original structure of his essay it is clearly no mere digression but a highly developed tissue of thinking integral to the development of the wider argument:

> The objects in an imaginary landscape cannot be said, like the words of a poem or the notes of a melody, to be the actual utterance of a feeling; but there must be some feeling with which they harmonize, and which they have a tendency to raise up in the spectator's mind … This, if it be

> not poetry, is so nearly allied to it, as scarcely to require being distinguished. (pp. 354-5)

The atmospheric landscape painting which Mill hails as the truest example of 'poetry' in paint serves as the final, clinching example in his argument that 'All art . . . in proportion as it produces its effects by an appeal to the emotions partakes of poetry, unless it partakes of oratory, or of narrative' (p. 355).

The significance for Whistler's reception becomes obvious when this passage is placed alongside the spirited defence of the *Nocturnes* by D. S. MacColl, written after Whistler had staked his claim to poetry in the 'Ten O'Clock' lecture: 'Narrative', argues MacColl,

> is a device more proper to literature than to painting, allegory is a device that is thin diet in either; but you do not get rid of poetry by discarding these. By poetry I mean the bringing home of an image to the emotions by the arts of the senses; literature must do this by evocation, painting does it by direct presentment . . . if Mr Whistler and M. Degas are not poets I should like to know who is. (p. 119)

The 'bringing home of an image to the emotions by the arts of the senses' is evidently something quite different from the narrativising criticism of those 'with whom', in the words of Whistler's lecture, 'sentiment is mistaken for poetry' (p. 137). MacColl seems to have absorbed Whistler's dialectical thinking about poetry more thoroughly than the critic to whom he was responding (Charles W. Furse). Indeed, MacColl reproaches Furse for suggesting that talk of 'poetry' does nothing but distract from the distinctively visual expressiveness of the painting: 'To say that the poetry is a pretext for the painting, is like saying that the Mass is a pretext for the sacring bell' (p. 119).[45] Poetry for MacColl, then, does not denote mere literary source material, irrelevant to the merits of the picture itself; rather, it is a name for the way in which the painter's 'thought and feeling' are expressed and harmonised, in and through paint (p. 119). This is an idea implicit in Ruskin's sense of poetry as dependent upon the artist's inventive 'power of arrangement',[46] and

suggested too by Mill's sense of the 'unity, and wholeness, and aesthetic congruity of the picture' as expressive of feeling (p. 354). In other words, it was encouraged by both the widening and the narrowing of poetry's semantic range in the ways I have been exploring.

The critic who brought these developments to fruition was Walter Pater. In 'The School of Giorgione' (1877), Pater deprecated 'the false generalisation of all art into forms of poetry' because this too often entailed the dissolution of the 'sensuous element in art' in favour of 'mere poetical thought or sentiment'.[47] Like Whistler, Pater wants to insist that each artistic medium has 'its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm' (p. 102). Rather than throw out the term, however, Pater redeems it by identifying delight in the 'pictorial qualities' of the picture – the 'drawing', the 'colouring' – as 'the vehicle of whatever poetry … may lie beyond them' (p. 104). Leaving behind his earlier description of Botticelli as a 'poetical painter', i.e. one who traded in poetical themes and stories, Pater develops a new formulation – 'pictorial poetry' – to account for the art of Giorgione. The works of the Venetian painter, he writes, 'belong to a sort of poetry which tells itself without an articulated story', the name of which is lyric (p. 107):

> lyrical poetry, precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form, without a deduction of something from that matter itself, is, at least artistically, the highest and most complete form of poetry. (p. 108)

It is this quality that makes lyric most akin to music, towards whose condition, Pater tells us in one of his most quotable moments, '[a]ll art constantly aspires' (p. 106). Lyric's deep-rooted associations with music thus combine with its defining opposition to narrative to save the idea of 'the *painter*'s poetry' for Aestheticism – and to reveal the intelligibility and coherence of Whistler's seemingly puzzling usage.[48]

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NOTES

[1] D. S. MacColl, 'The Logic of Painting', *Albemarle Review*, 2 (Sept. 1892), repr. in *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, ed. Kate Flint (Abingdon, 1984), pp. 112-19: 119.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, review in *Boulevard*, 14 Sept. 1862; quoted in *Charles Baudelaire: Art in Paris 1845-1862*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (1965), p. 220.

[3] J. A. M. Whistler to Fantin-Latour (Sept. 1862), in Miscellaneous Whistler Correspondence, Box 37, Pennell Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC, mfm. 772-4.

[4] Whistler, 'Mr Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"' (1885), in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890), p. 146.

[5] Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Aesthetic Value and the Professionalization of Victorian Art Criticism, 1837-78', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2 (1997), 71-94: 83.

[6] Baudelaire's word is 'compliquée': for the French text, see 'Peintres et Aqua-Fortistes', in *Curiosités esthétiques: L'Art romantique, et autres œuvres critiques*, ed. Henri Lemaitre (Paris, 1962), pp. 409-15: 413.

[7] 'Celebrities at Home, No. XCII: Mr James Whistler at Cheyne-walk', *The World*, 22 May 1878, p. 4.

[8] Whistler, 'The Red Rag', in *The Gentle Art*, pp. 126-8: 127.

[9] Quoted from Linda Merrill's transcript of the trial in *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington, DC, 1992), p. 184.

[10] See, for example, Suzanne M. Singletary's chapters on Baudelaire and Mallarmé in *James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music* (Abingdon, 2017); Anne Koval on Swinburne in 'From Poet to Painter: The Aestheticism of Swinburne and Whistler', in Sophia Andres and Brian Donnelly (eds.), *Poetry in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings* (New York, 2017), pp. 137-52; and Robert Harris on Symons, in '"Insane Thinking": The Impressionism of Arthur Symons', *Victoriographies*, 11 (2021), 126-47.

[11] See Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ, 2005) and Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ, 1999). See also, most recently, Guido

Mazzoni's account in *On Modern Poetry*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, Mass., 2022).

[12] 'poetry', *n.*, 2e, *Oxford English Dictionary* (entry revised 2006).

[13] Dugald Stewart, 'Preface to the First Dissertation', in *Supplement to the Fourth and Fifth Editions of the Encyclopædia Britannica* (Edinburgh, 1815), p. 5.

[14] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1985), ii. 14-15.

[15] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1840), in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn. (New York, 2002), pp. 509-38: 513, 512.

[16] John Stuart Mill, 'What Is Poetry?' (1833), in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (1981), pp. 340-65: 343.

[17] William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General' (1818), in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (1998), ii. 165-80: 173.

[18] See David Wellbery, *Lessing's 'Laocöon': Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, 1984).

[19] Art historians still argue over what Titian may have meant by this gesture. For an illuminating discussion, see Thomas Puttfarken, *Titian and Tragic Painting* (New Haven, Conn., 2005).

[20] Rensselaer W. Lee, 'Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting', *The Art Bulletin*, 22 (1940), 197-269: 203.

[21] Ibid., p. 261.

[22] Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (1769-90), ed. Robert B. Wark (San Marino, Calif., 1959), p. 50.

[23] See Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake* (New Haven, Conn., 2014), p. 14.

[24] George Washington Whistler to J. M. Whistler, 18 Jan. 1849, Glasgow University Library MS Whistler W660.

[25] John Ruskin, 'Of the received Opinions touching the "Grand Style"', *Modern Painters III* (1856), in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (1903-12), v. 17-34: 28.

[26] Quoted in Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, p. 158.
[27] Clive Wilmer, 'Ruskin and the Challenge of Modernity', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 38 (2011), 13-34: 24.
[28] Quoted in Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, p. 167.
[29] 'Ruskin's Instructions to Defense Counsel', repr. in Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, pp. 289-93: 292.
[30] Ruskin, 'Of the Real Nature of Greatness of Style', in *Modern Painters III: Works*, v. 44-69: 63.
[31] Ruskin, 'The Law of Help', in *Modern Painters V* (1860): *Works*, vii. 203-16: 210.
[32] Samuel Johnson, 'Waller' (1779), in *The Lives of the Poets*, vol. i, ed. John H. Middendorf (New Haven, Conn., 2010), pp. 261-324: 314.
[33] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven, Conn., 2007), p. 198.
[34] Ruskin, 'Of the True Ideal: – Secondly, Naturalist', in *Modern Painters III: Works*, v. 111-29: 126.
[35] William Hazlitt, 'On a Landscape of Nicolas Poussin' (1821), in *Selected Writings*, vi. 151-6: 153.
[36] Walter Pater, 'Sandro Botticelli' (1870), in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), pp. 39-48: 40.
[37] Quoted in Anne Koval, *Whistler in His Time* (1994), p. 35.
[38] Prince Hoare, 'No. XIV: Continuation of The Offices of Painting', in *The Artist*, ed. Prince Hoare, 2 vols. (1809-10), ii. 255-90: 257, 274, 284, 260, 268, 287, 256, 287.
[39] R. H. [Robert Hunt], 'Fine Arts', *The Examiner*, no. 543, 24 May 1818, p. 332. Robert Hunt was the brother of Leigh Hunt, the paper's editor: see Kenneth E. Kendall, *Leigh Hunt's Reflector* (The Hague, 1971), p. 146.
[40] Virginia Jackson, 'Lyric', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn., ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ, 2012), pp. 826-34: 830, 832.
[41] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford, 1953), p. 50.
[42] Quoted in G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art: The Hotho Transcript of the 1823 Berlin Lectures*, ed. and trans. Robert F. Brown (Oxford, 2014), p. 131.

[43] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, ed. and trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), i. 89.
[44] See the collated versions of the text in Mill, 'What Is Poetry?', pp. 353-4.
[45] The article MacColl was responding to is Charles W. Furse, 'Impressionism – What It Means', *Albemarle Review*, 1 (Aug. 1892), 47-51.
[46] Ruskin, 'Of the True Ideal: – Secondly, Naturalist', p. 111.
[47] Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione' (1877), in *The Renaissance*, pp. 102-22: 102.
[48] One further reason Whistler may have been drawn to the term 'poetry' was its increasingly close association with indistinctness and mystery in nineteenth century writing. See Fergus McGhee, 'Rossetti's Giorgione and the Victorian "Cult of Vagueness"', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 50 (2021), 279-95. On Whistler and the appeal of the hazy and indistinct, see Marc Simpson (ed.), *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* (New Haven, Conn., 2008).


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