

What is Poetry?

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Plato: “Poets can only make poems when they are inspired, a state in which they may say true things which they themselves cannot understand but more often only give accounts of things as they see them in the imperfect world, and therefore they should be banished from the Republic.”

Aristotle: “Poetry [ποίησις / *poesis*] is an imitation of nature . . . Poetry is higher and more philosophical than history for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.”

Sir Philip Sidney: “Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word [Greek], that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end,—to teach and delight.”

Alexander Pope: “True wit is nature to advantage dress'd, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd, / Something, whose truth convinc'd at sight we find, / That gives us back the image of our mind.”

William Wordsworth: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “Poetry is the best words in the best order.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought.”

Matthew Arnold: “Poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things, and hence its importance.” (2) “Poetry is, at bottom, a criticism of life.”

Emily Dickinson: “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

Paul Valéry: “Poetry is a language within language . . . poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking.”

T. S. Eliot: “The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.”

Ezra Pound: “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. . . .”
“Artists are the antennae of the race.”

Adrienne Rich: “In a political culture of managed spectacles and passive spectators, poetry appears as a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode. The reading of a poem, a poetry reading, is not a spectacle, nor can it be passively received.”

Denise Levertov: “For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal.”

Kenneth Koch: “[Poetry] can be defined first as a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning”

Michael Longley: “If I knew where poems come from, I'd go there.”