

# **LECTURES ON THE ENGLISH POETS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649628292

Lectures on the English Poets by William Hazlitt

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**WILLIAM HAZLITT**

**LECTURES ON THE  
ENGLISH POETS**



# LECTURES

ON THE

# ENGLISH POETS.



LONDON:

GEORGE EARLE, 67, CASTLE STREET EAST,

BERNERS STREET, OXFORD STREET.

---

1847.



## PREFACE.

---

THE following pages were not originally intended for the public eye, but were written for the instruction of the Author's children, and read to one of them in the beginning of the year 1841. They were lately perused by a friend of the Author, who recommended the publication of them as containing a concise and connected view of our Poets, and their poetry, without the introduction of those long, and sometimes not very judiciously selected, specimens or extracts with which works of a similar nature generally abound, but which interrupt the survey, and add much to the size and expense of the book. As his other many avocations did not allow him time to revise his composition with that attention which the subject requires, the Author at first felt disinclined to its being printed; but, in the hope that, even as it now stands, it may be of some service to its readers, or at least, to the younger portion of them, he has been induced to comply with his friend's suggestion.





## LECTURES ON THE ENGLISH POETS.

---

### LECTURE I.

It may very naturally be expected that any discourse assuming, however unworthily, the shape of a Lecture on Poetry, should commence with some definition of the art. Now, although we have met with many different definitions of it, we have never found one of so clear and distinct a character as to give us complete satisfaction. Therefore, whether it be, as defined by Dr. Johnson, "*The art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason;*"—by Dr. Blair as "*The language of passion or enlivened imagination, formed most commonly into regular numbers;*" or, according to the present learned Archbishop of Dublin, "*Elegant and decorated language in metre, expressing such and such thoughts;*" or which of these definitions approaches the nearest to correctness we do not presume to determine. Nor do we offer one of our own; but would rather say, with the first named celebrated philologist, when, though some-

what inconsistently, he observes, "to circumscribe poetry by definition would only shew the narrowness of the definer."

Neither is it our intention, unequal as we are to the task, to enter into any deep or philosophical inquiry into the nature or origin of Poetry, nor to dwell upon its rank or importance in the realms of literature, placed as it has been in a scale higher than history,—“above philosophers' works and orators' harangues.” That it is natural to mankind may be inferred from its universal diffusion;—so universal that, according to Sir Philip Sidney, whilst no learned nation doth despise it, no barbarous nation is without it. It no doubt exists in its essential qualities amongst the most uncultivated people, finding its way, as Lord Bacon says, where other learning stands excluded. The natives of every country, however ignorant or illiterate, make use of impassioned and oftentimes of very figurative language.\* Whether triumphing over the defeat of their foes, or bewailing the loss of their friends,—whether celebrating the bravery of their leaders, or the beauty of their loves,—the Muse will be found conveying to them her most genuine inspirations.

“ Oft, beneath the odorous shade  
Of Chili's boundless forests laid,  
She deigns to hear the savage youth repeat,  
In loose numbers, wildly sweet,  
Their feather'd-cinctured chiefs and dusky loves.”

\* Appendix, Note A.

The ancient Britons, like other Celtic nations, were passionately fond of poetry, and held their poets, the Bards, in the highest estimation. These composed for them hymns in honor of their gods, and heroic songs in praise of their great men. Our Teutonic ancestors also partook of this passion for poetical compositions, and the minstrels of the Anglo-Saxons were held in almost an equal degree of veneration with the Bards. The examination of English poetry may therefore be entered upon without seeking for it in any foreign origin, although it has no doubt been much influenced in its progress by the poetry of other nations; particularly, in its earlier stages, by that of France and Italy; afterwards by the classical productions of Greece and Rome, and the sublime strains of the Hebrew Scriptures; again, by the adoption of French models, and more recently, perhaps, by the wildness and extravagance of the German school. And such an examination would, probably, be much facilitated by dividing it according to certain distinct periods of the history of the country. We are aware of the difficulty of establishing any such definite boundaries, for it has been well said, that the different periods of literary history melt into each other like the colours of the rainbow; yet we can have little doubt but that there are certain æras in the annals of a country, the events of which create in the minds of the then existing generation those feelings and opinions that neces-