

No. 2. (*Price One Shilling.*) FEBRUARY, 1850.

**With an Etching by JAMES COLLINSON.**

## **The Germ:**

**Thoughts towards Nature  
In Poetry, Literature, and Art.**

When whoso merely hath a little thought  
Will plainly think the thought which is for him,—  
Not imaging another's bright or dim,  
Not mangling with new words what others taught;  
When whoso speaks, from having either sought  
Or only found,—will speak, not just to skim  
A shallow surface with words made and trim,  
But in that very speech the matter brought:  
Be not too keen to cry—"So this is all!—  
A thing I might myself have thought as well,  
But would not say it, for it was not worth!"  
Ask: "Is this truth?" For is it still to tell  
That, be the theme a point or the whole earth,  
Truth is a circle, perfect, great or small?

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### **The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art**

The object we have proposed to ourselves in writing on Art, has been “an endeavour to encourage and enforce an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature; and also to direct attention, as an auxiliary medium, to the comparatively few works which Art has yet produced in this spirit.” It is in accordance with the former and more prominent of these objects that the writer proposes at present to treat.

An unprejudiced spectator of the recent progress and main direction of Art in England will have observed, as a great change in the character of the productions of the modern school, a marked attempt to lead the taste of the public into a new channel by producing pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of conventionalities and feeble reminiscences from the Old Masters; an entire seeking after originality in a more humble manner than has been practised since the decline of Italian Art in the Middle Ages. This has been most strongly shown by the landscape painters, among whom there are many who have raised an entirely new school of natural painting, and whose productions undoubtedly surpass all others in the simple attention to nature in detail as well as in generalities. By this they have succeeded in earning for themselves the reputation of being the finest landscape painters in Europe. But, although this success has been great and merited, it is not of them that we have at present to treat, but rather to recommend their example to their fellow-labourers, the historical painters.

That the system of study to which this would necessarily lead requires a somewhat longer and more devoted course of observation than any other is undoubted; but that it has a reward in a greater effect produced, and more delight in the searching, is, the writer thinks, equally certain. We shall find a greater pleasure in proportion to our closer communion with nature, and by a more exact adherence to all her details, (for nature has no peculiarities or excentricities) in whatsoever direction her study may conduct.

This patient devotedness appears to be a conviction peculiar to, or at least more purely followed by, the early Italian Painters; a feeling which, exaggerated, and its object mistaken by them, though still held holy and pure, was the cause of the retirement of many of the greatest men from the world to the monastery; there, in undisturbed silence and humility,

“Monotonous to paint  
Those endless cloisters and eternal aisles  
With the same series, Virgin, Babe, and Saint,  
With the same cold, calm, beautiful regard.”

Even with this there is not associated a melancholy feeling alone; for, although the object was mistaken, yet there is evinced a consciousness of purpose definite and most elevated; and again, we must remember, as a great cause of this effect, that the Arts were, for the most part, cleric, and not laic, or at least were under the predominant influence of the clergy, who were the most important patrons by far, and their houses the safest receptacles for the works of the great painter.

The modern artist does not retire to monasteries, or practise discipline; but he may show his participation in the same high feeling by a firm attachment to truth in every point of representation, which is the most just method. For how can good be sought by evil means, or by falsehood, or by slight in any degree? By a determination to represent the thing and the whole of the thing, by training himself to the deepest observation of its fact and detail, enabling himself to reproduce, as far as possible, nature herself, the painter will best evince his share of faith.

It is by this attachment to truth in its most severe form that the followers of the Arts have to show that they share in the peculiar character of the present age,—a humility of knowledge, a diffidence of attainment; for, as Emerson has well observed,

“The time is infected with Hamlet's unhappiness,—‘Sicklied o'er with the the pale cast of thought.’

Is this so bad then? Sight is the last thing to be pitied. Would we be blind? Do we fear lest we should outsee nature and God, and drink truth dry?”

It has been said that there is presumption in this movement of the modern school, a want of deference to established authorities, a removing of ancient landmarks. This is best answered by the profession that nothing can be more humble than the pretension to the observation of facts alone, and the truthful rendering of them. If we are not to depart from established principles, how are we to advance at all? Are we to remain still? Remember, no thing remains still; that which does not advance falls backward. That this movement is an advance, and that it is of nature herself, is shown by its going nearer to truth in every object produced, and by its being guided by the very principles the ancient painters followed, as soon as they attained the mere power of representing an object faithfully. These principles are now revived, not from them, though through their example, but from nature herself.

That the earlier painters came nearer to fact, that they were less of the art, artificial, cannot be better shown than by the statement of a few examples from their works. There is a magnificent Niello work by an unknown Florentine artist, on which is a group of the Saviour in the lap of the Virgin. She is old, (a most touching point); lamenting aloud, clutches passionately the heavy-weighted body on her knee; her mouth is open. Altogether it is one of the most powerful appeals possible to be conceived; for there are few but will consider this identification with humanity to be of more effect than any refined or emasculate treatment of the same subject by later artists, in which we have the fact forgotten for the sake of the type of religion, which the Virgin was always taken to represent, whence she is shown as still young; as if, nature being taken typically, it were not better to adhere to the emblem throughout, confident by this means to maintain its appropriateness, and, therefore, its value and force.

In the Niello work here mentioned there is a delineation of the Fall, in which the serpent has given to it a human head with a most sweet, crafty expression. Now in these two instances the style is somewhat rude; but there are passion and feeling in it. This is not a question of mere execution, but of mind, however developed. Let us not mistake, however, from this that execution should be neglected, but only maintained as a most important *aid*, and in that quality alone, so that we do not forget the soul for the hand. The power of representing an object, that its entire intention may be visible, its lesson felt, is all that is absolutely necessary: mere technicalities of performance are but additions; and not the real intent and end of painting, as many have considered them to be. For as the knowledge is stronger and more pure in Masaccio than in the Caracci, and the faith higher and greater,—so the first represents nature with more true feeling and love, with a deeper insight into her tenderness; he follows her more humbly, and has produced to us more of her simplicity; we feel his appeal to be more earnest: it is the crying out of the man, with none of the strut of the actor.

Let us have the mind and the mind's-workings, not the remains of earnest thought which has been frittered away by a long dreary course of preparatory study, by which all life has been evaporated. Never forget that there is in the wide river of

nature something which every body who has a rod and line may catch, precious things which every one may dive for.

It need not be feared that this course of education would lead to a repetition of the toe-trippings of the earliest Italian school, a sneer which is manifestly unfair; for this error, as well as several others of a similar kind, was not the result of blindness or stupidity, but of the simple ignorance of what had not been applied to the service of painting at their time. It cannot be shown that they were incorrect in expression, false in drawing, or unnatural in what is called composition. On the contrary, it is demonstrable that they exceeded all others in these particulars, that they partook less of coarseness and of conventional sentiment than any school which succeeded them, and that they looked more to nature; in fact, were more true, and less artificial. That their subjects were generally of a melancholy cast is acknowledged, which was an accident resulting from the positions their pictures were destined to occupy. No man ever complained that the Scriptures were morbid in their tendency because they treat of serious and earnest subjects: then why of the pictures which represent such? A certain gaunt length and slenderness have also been commented upon most severely; as if the Italians of the fourteenth century were as so many dray horses, and the artist were blamed for not following his model. The consequence of this direction of taste is that we have life-guardsmen and pugilists taken as models for kings, gentlemen, and philosophers. The writer was once in a studio where a man, six feet two inches in height, with atlantean shoulders, was sitting for King Alfred. That there is no greater absurdity than this will be perceived by any one that has ever read the description of the person of the king given by his historian and friend Asser.

The sciences have become almost exact within the present century. Geology and chemistry are almost re-instituted. The first has been nearly created; the second expanded so widely that it now searches and measures the creation. And how has this been done but by bringing greater knowledge to bear upon a wider range of experiment; by being precise in the search after truth? If this adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory,—to begin at the beginning and not fly to the end,—has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts? It cannot be well to degrade a lesson by falsehood. Truth in every particular ought to be the aim of the artist. Admit no untruth: let the priest's garment be clean.

Let us now return to the Early Italian Painters. A complete refutation of any charge that the character of their school was necessarily gloomy will be found in the works of Benozzo Gozzoli, as in his 'Vineyard' where there are some grape-gatherers the most elegant and graceful imaginable; this painter's children are the most natural ever painted. In Ghiberti,—in Fra Angilico, (well named),—in Masaccio,—in Ghirlandajo, and in Baccio della Porta, in fact in nearly all the works of the painters of this school, will be found a character of gentleness, grace, and freedom, which cannot be surpassed by any other school, be that which it may;

and it is evident that this result must have been obtained by their peculiar attachment to simple nature alone, their casting aside all ornament, or rather their perfect ignorance of such,—a happy fortune none have shared with them. To show that with all these qualifications they have been pre-eminent in energy and dignity, let us instance the ‘Air Demons’ of Orcagna, where there is a woman borne through the air by an Evil Spirit. Her expression is the most terrible imaginable; she grasps her bearer with desperation, looking out around her into space, agonized with terror. There are other figures in the same picture of men who have been cast down, and are falling through the air: one descends with his hands tied, his chin up, and long hair hanging from his head in a mass. One of the Evil Spirits hovering over them has flat wings, as though they were made of plank: this gives a most powerful character to the figure. Altogether, this picture contains perhaps a greater amount of bold imagination and originality of conception than any of the kind ever painted. For sublimity there are few works which equal the ‘Archangels’ of Giotto, who stand singly, holding their sceptres, and with relapsed wings. The ‘Paul’ of Masaccio is a well-known example of the dignified simplicity of which these artists possessed so large a share. These instances might be multiplied without end; but surely enough have been cited in the way of example to show the surpassing talent and knowledge of these painters, and their consequent success, by following natural principles, until the introduction of false and meretricious ornament led the Arts from the simple chastity of nature, which it is as useless to attempt to elevate as to endeavour to match the works of God by those of man. Let the artist be content to study nature alone, and not dream of elevating any of her works, which are alone worthy of representation. {5}

{5} The sources from which these examples are drawn, and where many more might be found, are principally:—*D’Agincourt: “Histoire d’ l’Art par les Monumens;”*—*Rossini: “Storia della Pittura;”*—*Ottley: “Italian School of Design,”* and his 120 Fac-similes of scarce prints;—and the “Gates of San Giovanni,” by Ghiberti; of which last a cast of one entire is set up in the Central School of Design, Somerset House; portions of the same are also in the Royal Academy.

The Arts have always been most important moral guides. Their flourishing has always been coincident with the most wholesome period of a nation's: never with the full and gaudy bloom which but hides corruption, but the severe health of its most active and vigorous life; its mature youth, and not the floridity of age, which, like the wide full open petals of a flower, indicates that its glory is about to pass away. There has certainly always been a period like the short warm season the Canadians call the “Indian Summer,” which is said to be produced by the burning of the western forests, causing a factitious revival of the dying year: so there always seems to have been a flush of life before the final death of the Arts in each period:—in Greece, in the sculptors and architects of the time after Pericles; in the Germans, with the successors of Albert Durer. In fact, in every school there has been a spring, a summer, an autumn, an “Indian Summer,” and then winter; for as

surely as the “Indian Summer,” (which is, after all, but an unhealthy flush produced by destruction,) so surely does winter come. In the Arts, the winter has been exaggerated action, conventionalism, gaudy colour, false sentiment, voluptuousness, and poverty of invention: and, of all these characters, that which has been the most infallible herald of decease, voluptuousness, has been the most rapid and sure. Corruption lieth under it; and every school, and indeed every individual, that has pandered to this, and departed from the true spirit in which all study should be conducted, sought to degrade and sensualize, instead of chasten and render pure, the humanity it was instructed to elevate. So has that school, and so have those individuals, lost their own power and descended from their high seat, fallen from the priest to the mere parasite, from the law-giver to the mere courtier.

If we have entered upon a new age, a new cycle of man, of which there are many signs, let us have it unstained by this vice of sensuality of mind. The English school has lately lost a great deal of this character; why should we not be altogether free from it? Nothing can degrade a man or a nation more than this meanness; why should we not avoid it? Sensuality is a meanness repugnant to youth, and disgusting in age: a degradation at all times. Let us say

“My strength is as the strength of ten,  
Because my heart is pure.”

Bearing this in mind,—the conviction that, without the pure heart, nothing can be done worthy of us; by this, that the most successful school of painters has produced upon us the intention of their earnestness at this distance of time,—let us follow in their path, guided by their light: not so subservient as to lose our own freedom, but in the confidence of equal power and equal destiny; and then rely that we shall obtain the same success and equal or greater power, such as is given to the age in which we live. This is the only course that is worthy of the influence which might be exerted by means of the Arts upon the character of the people: therefore let it be the only one for us to follow if we hope to share in the work.

That the real power of the Arts, in conjunction with Poetry, upon the actions of any age is, or might be, predominant above all others will be readily allowed by all that have given any thought to the subject: and that there is no assignable limit to the good that may be wrought by their influence is another point on which there can be small doubt. Let us then endeavour to call up and exert this power in the worthiest manner, not forgetting that we chose a difficult path in which there are many snares, and holding in mind the motto, “*No Cross, no Crown.*”

Believe that there is that in the fact of truth, though it be only in the character of a single leaf earnestly studied, which may do its share in the great labor of the world: remember that it is by truth alone that the Arts can ever hold the position for which they were intended, as the most powerful instruments, the most gentle guides; that, of all classes, there is none to whom the celebrated words of Lessing, “That the

destinies of a nation depend upon its young men between nineteen and twenty-five years of age,” can apply so well as to yourselves. Recollect, that your portion in this is most important: that your share is with the poet's share; that, in every careless thought or neglected doubt, you shelve your duty, and forsake your trust; fulfil and maintain these, whether in the hope of personal fame and fortune, or from a sense of power used to its intentions; and you may hold out both hands to the world. Trust it, and it will have faith in you; will hearken to the precepts you may have permission to impart.

No. 4. (*Price One Shilling.*) MAY, 1850.

**With an Etching by W.H. Deverell.**

## **Art and Poetry:**

**Being Thoughts towards Nature  
Conducted principally by Artists.**

When whoso merely hath a little thought  
    Will plainly think the thought which is for him,—  
    Not imaging another's bright or dim,  
Not mangling with new words what others taught;  
When whoso speaks, from having either sought  
    Or only found,—will speak, not just to skim  
    A shallow surface with words made and trim,  
But in that very speech the matter brought:  
Be not too keen to cry—"So this is all!—  
    A thing I might myself have thought as well,  
But would not say it, for it was not worth!"  
    Ask: "Is this truth?" For is it still to tell  
That, be the theme a point or the whole earth,  
Truth is a circle, perfect, great or small?

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### Modern Giants

Yes! there are Giants on the earth in these days; but it is their great bulk, and the nearness of our view, which prevents us from perceiving their grandeur. This is how it is that the glory of the present is lost upon the contemporaries of the greatest men; and, perhaps this was Swift's meaning, when he said that Gulliver could not discover exactly what it was that strode among the corn-ridges in the Brobdignagian field: thus, we lose the brightness of things of our own time in consequence of their proximity.

It is of the development of our individual perceptions, and the application thereof to a good use, that the writer humbly endeavours to treat. We will for this purpose take as an example, that which may be held to indicate the civilization of a period more than any thing else; namely, the popular perception of the essentials of Poetry; and endeavour to show that while the beauties of old writers are acknowledged, (tho' not in proportion to the attention of each individual in his works to nature alone) the modern school is contemned and unconsidered; and also that much of the active poetry of modern life is neglected by the majority of the writers themselves.

There seems to be an opinion gaining ground fast, in spite of all the shaking of conventional heads, that the Poets of the present day are equal to all others,

excepting one: however this may be, it is certain we are not fair judges, because of the natural reason stated before; and there is decidedly one great fault in the moderns, that not only do they study models with which they can never become intimately acquainted, but that they neglect, or rather reject as worthless, that which they alone can carry on with perfect success: I mean the knowledge of themselves, and the characteristics of their own actual living. Thus, if a modern Poet or Artist (the latter much more culpably errs) seeks a subject exemplifying charity, he rambles into ancient Greece or Rome, awakening not one half the sympathy in the spectator, as do such incidents as may be seen in the streets every day. For instance; walking with a friend the other day, we met an old woman, exceedingly dirty, restlessly pattering along the kerb of a crowded thoroughfare, trying to cross: her eyes were always wandering here and there, and her mouth was never still; her object was evident, but for my own part, I must needs be fastidious and prefer to allow her to take the risk of being run over, to overcoming my own disgust. Not so my friend; he marched up manfully, and putting his arm over the old woman's shoulder, led her across as carefully as though she were a princess. Of course, I was ashamed: ashamed! I was frightened; I expected to see the old woman change into a tall angel and take him off to heaven, leaving me her original shape to repent in. On recovering my thoughts, I was inclined to take up my friend and carry him home in triumph, I felt so strong. Why should not this thing be as poetical as any in the life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary or any one else? for, so we look at it with a pure thought, we shall see about it the same light the Areopagite saw at Jerusalem surround the Holy Virgin, and the same angels attending and guarding it.

And there is something else we miss; there is the poetry of the things about us; our railways, factories, mines, roaring cities, steam vessels, and the endless novelties and wonders produced every day; which if they were found only in the Thousand and One Nights, or in any poem classical or romantic, would be gloried over without end; for as the majority of us know not a bit more about them, but merely their names, we keep up the same mystery, the main thing required for the surprise of the imagination.

Next to Poetry, Painting and Music have most power over the mind; and how do you apply this influence? In what direction is it forced? Why, for the last, you sit in your drawing-rooms, and listen to a quantity of tinkling of brazen marches of going to war; but you never see before your very eyes, the palpable victory of leading nature by her own power, to a conquest of blessings; and when the music is over, you turn to each other, and enthusiastically whisper, "How fine!"—You point out to others, (as if they had no eyes) the sentiment of a flowing river with the moon on it, as an emblem of the after-peace, but you see not this in the long white cloud of steam, the locomotive pours forth under the same moon, rushing on; the perfect type of the same, with the presentment of the struggle beforehand. The strong engine is never before you, sighing all night, with the white cloud above the chimney-shaft, escaping like the spirits Solomon put his seal upon, in the Arabian

Tales; these mightier spirits are bound in a faster vessel; and then let forth, as of little worth, when their work is done.

The Earth shakes under you, from the footfall of the Genii man has made, and you groan about the noise. Vast roads draw together the Earth, and you say how they spoil the prospect, which you never cared a farthing about before.

You revel in Geology: but in chemistry, the modern science, possessing thousands of powers as great as any used yet, you see no glory:—the only thought is so many Acids and Alkalies. You require a metaphor for treachery, and of course you think of our puny old friend the Viper; but the Alkaline, more searching and more unknown, that may destroy you and your race, you have never heard of,—and yet this possesses more of the very quality required, namely, mystery, than any other that is in your hands.

The only ancient character you have retained in its proper force is Love; but you seem never to see any light about the results of long labour of mind, the most intense Love. Devotedness, magnanimity, generosity, you seem to think have left the Earth since the Crusades. In fact, you never go out into Life: living only in the past world, you go on repeating in new combinations the same elements for the same effect. You have taught an enlightened Public, that the province of Poetry is to reproduce the Ancients; not as Keats did, with the living heart of our own Life; but so as to cause the impression that you are not aware that they had wives and families like yourselves, and laboured and rested like us all.

The greatest, perhaps, of modern poets seeming to take refuge from this, has looked into the heart of man, and shown you its pulsations, fears, self-doubts, hates, goodness, devotedness, and noble world-love; this is not done under pretty flowers of metaphor in the lispings of a pet parson, or in the strong but uncertain fashion of the American school; still less in the dry operose quackery of professed doctors of psychology, mere chaff not studied from nature, and therefore worthless, never felt, and therefore useless; but with the firm knowing hand of the anatomist, demonstrating and making clear to others, that the knowledge may be applied to purpose. All this difficult task is achieved so that you may read till your own soul is before you, and you know it; but the enervated public complains that the work is obscure forsooth: so we are always looking for green grass—verdant meads, tall pines, vineyards, etc., as the essentials of poetry; these are all very pretty and very delicate, the dust blows not in your eyes, but Chaucer has told us all this, and while it was new, far better than any one else; why are we not to have something besides? Let us see a little of the poetry of man's own works,—“Visibly in his garden walketh God.”

The great portion of the public take a morbid delight in such works as Frankenstein, that “Poor, impossible monster abhorred,” who would be disgusting if he were not so extremely ludicrous: and all this search after impossible mystery, such trumpery!

growing into the popular taste, is fed with garbage; doing more harm than all the preachings and poundings of optimistic Reviews will be able to remedy in an hundred years.

The study of such matters as these does other harm than merely poisoning the mind in one direction; it renders us sceptical of virtue in others, and we lose the power of pure perception. So —reading the glorious tale of Griselda and looking about you, you say there never was such a woman; your wise men say she was a fool; are there no such fools round about you? pray look close:—so the result of this is, you see no lesson in such things, or at least cannot apply it, and therefore the powers of the author are thrown away. Do you think God made Boccaccio and Chaucer to amuse you in your idle hours, only that you might sit listening like crowned idiots, and then debate concerning their faithfulness to truth? You never can imagine but they knew more of nature than any of us, or that they had less reverence for her.

In reference to Painting, the Public are taught to look with delight upon murky old masters, with dismally demoniac trees, and dull waters of lead, colourless and like ice; upon rocks that make geologists wonder, their angles are so impossible, their fractures are so new. Thousands are given for uncomfortable Dutch sun-lights; but if you are shown a transcript of day itself, with the purple shadow upon the mountains, and across the still lake, you know nothing of it because your fathers never bought such: so you look for nothing in it; nay, let me set you in the actual place, let the water damp your feet, stand in the chill of the shadow itself, and you will never tell me the colour on the hill, or where the last of the crows caught the sinking sunlight. Letting observation sleep, what can you know of nature? and you *are* a judge of landscape indeed. So it is that the world is taught to think of nature, as seen through other men's eyes, without any reference to its own original powers of perception, and much natural beauty is lost.