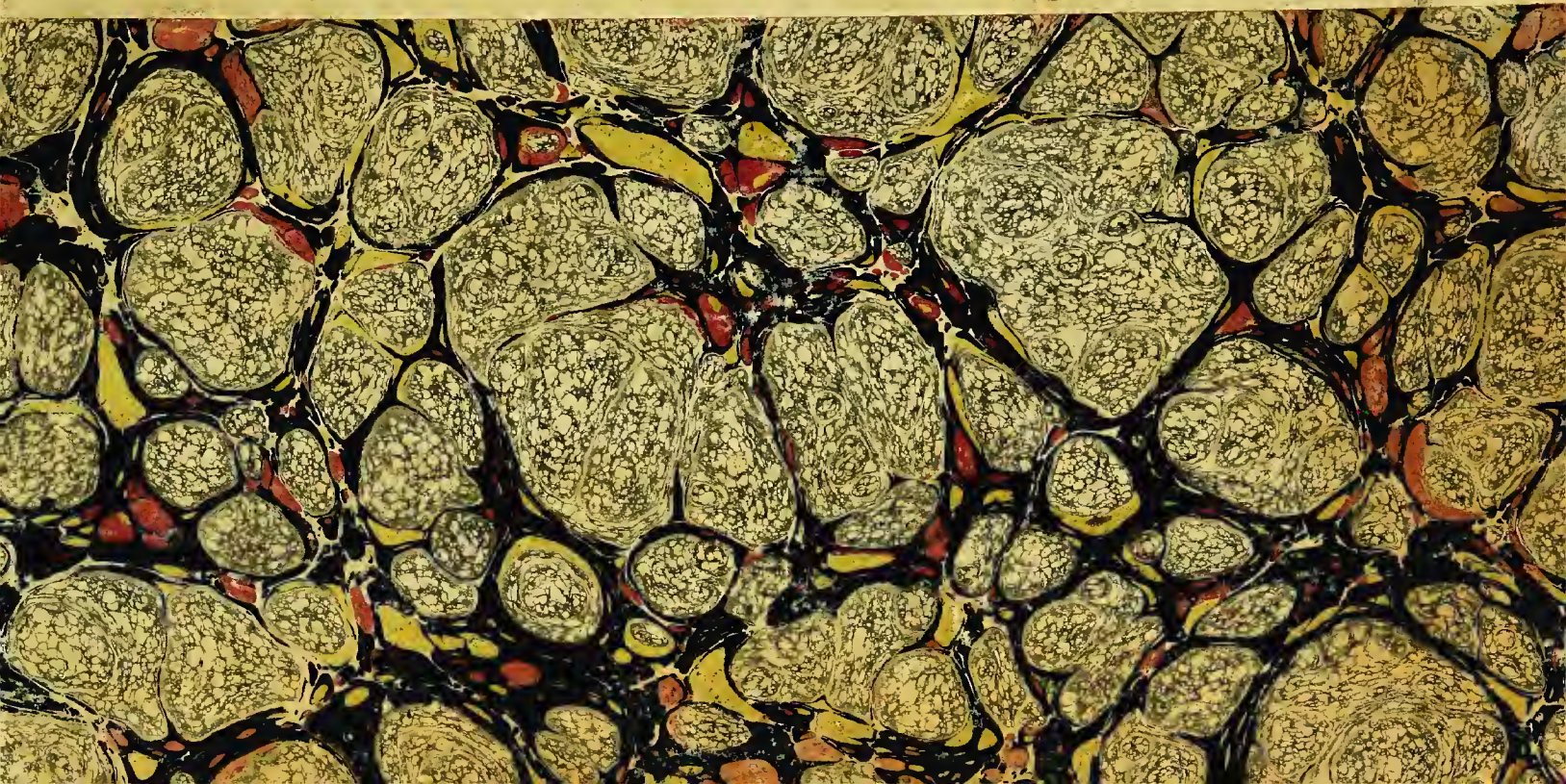

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CRITICISM AND BEAUTY

A LECTURE REWRITTEN

BEING THE ROMANES LECTURE FOR 1909

BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

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PREFATORY NOTE

THE sub-title of this lecture is in strictness erroneous. The lecture has not been rewritten; it is now written for the first time. It unfortunately happened that after I had promised the University authorities to deliver it in the course of last year, events occurred which deprived me of the leisure necessary to the proper carrying out of my undertaking. I had therefore to choose between leaving the managers of the Romanes trust without a lecturer; or doing my best to give, in some rough and extempore form, the outlines of the subject which I had selected for treatment.

Rightly or wrongly I chose the latter of these alternatives: and the choice was not without its advantages. But it had two serious disadvantages. My theme was little adapted to my capacity for extempore statement, and it was very unfamiliar to the reporters. The consequences were such as might perhaps have been foreseen. The lecture, as reported, gave most imperfect expression to my views;—was, indeed, sometimes barely intelligible.

It had to be published immediately, so that correction was impossible. But in any case no mere correction could have remedied its defects. Fortune, which gave me no leisure for writing before the lecture was delivered, has given me a few weeks since. I have employed them in putting what I desired to say in a form in which I hope it will at least be possible to understand it.

Let me add that writers on the subject I have chosen have to use a most defective terminology. At every turn its poverty hampers them. The familiar word, often the only word, is too often the wrong word. There is, for instance, no expression which, according to everyday usage, describes the poet, the writer of literary prose, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect and, let me add, the historian. There is no term which describes their works. I have commonly used for these purposes the expressions 'Artist', 'Art': and it is thus that these words must be understood unless the context forbids it.

An inadequacy of language yet more embarrassing attaches to the whole group of terms which express aesthetic quality and aesthetic feeling. I have used, for instance, the word 'beauty' on the

title-page: and the word 'pleasure' constantly recurs in the text. But works of literature or art may have admirable aesthetic quality and yet not be 'beautiful' in the everyday meaning of that expression, while 'pleasure' is but a poor, and (what is worse) ambiguous, name for what is valuable in aesthetic feeling. If this were a treatise instead of a lecture, these and other important questions of definition and nomenclature would have to be dealt with at length. As it is, I must throw myself on the indulgence of readers who will probably incline to mercy in proportion as their own experience has shown them the difficulty of expressing semi-philosophic arguments in familiar language.

4 Carlton Gardens,
April, 1910.

CRITICISM AND BEAUTY

CRITICISM AND BEAUTY

I

THE theme of this paper is Beauty and the criticism of Beauty; aesthetic excellence and its analysis. From prehistoric times men have occupied themselves in producing works of Art: since the time of Aristotle they have spent learned energy in commenting on them. How much are we the wiser? What real insight do the commentaries give us into the qualities which produce aesthetic pleasure, or into the marks which distinguish good art from bad?

Any man desirous of obtaining answers to questions like these would naturally turn in the first place to the history of criticism, and if he did so he would certainly be well rewarded. It may be doubted, however, whether the reward would consist in the satisfaction of his curiosity. For in proportion as criticism has endeavoured to establish principles of composition, to lay down laws of Beauty, to fix criterions of excellence, so it seems to me to have failed: its triumphs, and they are great, have been won on a different field. The critics who have dealt most successfully with theory

have dealt with it destructively. They have demolished the dogmas of their predecessors, but have advanced few dogmas of their own. So that, after some twenty-three centuries of aesthetic speculation, we are still without any accepted body of aesthetic doctrine.

Perhaps the most perverse of all forms of critical theory is that which flourished so luxuriantly immediately after the revival of learning. It professed to base itself on experience. Accepting the classical masterpieces as supreme models of excellence, it asked how they were made. To examine minutely the procedure of the great classical writers, to embody their example in rules, to standardize their practice, seemed the obvious method of enabling the moderns to attain some tincture of the literary merits so ardently admired in the ancients: and the method was applied with a simple-minded consistency which to the reader of the twentieth century seems both pathetic and ludicrous. If you would rival antiquity, said the critics, imitate it. If you would imitate it, note well its methods. When these have been thoroughly mastered, it should be as easy to frame recipes for writing an epic, as for compounding a plum-pudding:—and they framed them accordingly.[1]

[1] All this subject is admirably discussed in Professor Saintsbury's great *History of Criticism*.

It soon became evident, of course, that such a procedure was futile. The idea that the essential excellence of great literature could be extracted by this process of learned analysis was too crude to last. Yet rules of composition, supposed to be of classical authority, did not therefore at once fall into disrepute. A writer might, to be sure, ignore them; but he did so at his peril. If he failed, his failure was unredeemed. He could not even claim to be 'correct'. If his talents compelled success, he was classed as an 'irregular genius', to be reluctantly allowed a licence forbidden to ordinary mankind.

In the criticism of Music and Painting similar tendencies have shown themselves from time to time; and if Antiquity had left us masterpieces in these arts, and if Aristotle had effectively commented on them, the failure of post-renaissance criticism might have been as prominent in these departments of aesthetics as it has been in literature. As it is, the failure is the same in kind. The study of ancient sculpture gave rise in the eighteenth century to some very famous generalizations. But they were based on an imperfect knowledge of Greek art; and (I imagine) have long lost the authority they once possessed. The criticism of music and painting shows the same weaknesses

as the criticism of literature. Theory has lagged behind practice; and the procedure of the dead has too often been embodied in rules which serve no other purpose than to embarrass the living.

Criticism, however, of this kind has had its day. It is no longer in demand. The attempt to limit aesthetic expression by rules is seen to be futile. The attempt to find formulae for the creation of new works of beauty by taking old works of beauty to pieces and noting how they were made is seen to be more futile still. But if these kinds of criticism are obsolete, what is the criticism which now occupies their place?

It is abundant, and, I think, admirable. The modern commentator is concerned rather to point out beauties than to theorize about them. He does not measure merit by rule, nor crowd his pages with judgements based on precedent. His procedure is very different. He takes his reader, as it were by the hand, wanders with him through some chosen field of Literature or Art, guides him to its fairest scenes, dwells on what he deems to be its beauties, indicates its defects, and invites him to share his pleasures. His commentary on Art is often itself a work of art; he deals with literature in what is in itself literature. And he so uses the apparatus of learned research that the least

sympathetic reader, though he need not admire, can scarcely fail to understand the author criticized, the ends he aimed at, the models that swayed him, the conventions within which he worked, the nature of the successes which it was his fortune to achieve.

Of criticism like this we cannot have too much. Yet it has its difficulties; or rather it suggests difficulties which it scarcely attempts to solve. For its aesthetic judgements are, in spite of appearances, for the most part immediate and, so to speak, intuitive. 'Lo, here!' 'Lo, there!' 'This is good!' 'That is less good!' 'What subtle charm in this stanza!' 'What masterly orchestration in that symphony!' 'What admirable realism!' 'What delicate fancy!' The critic tells you what he likes or dislikes. He may even seem to tell you why. But the 'why' is rarely more than a statement of personal preferences. For these preferences he may quote authority. He may classify them. He may frame general propositions about them, which have all the air of embodying critical principles on which particular aesthetic judgements may securely rest. But, in fact, these general propositions only summarize a multitude of separate valuations of aesthetic merit, each of which is either self-sustaining, or is worthless.

Many critics, it is true, would be slow to admit this. They are not content with historical and descriptive accounts of art and artists. They long for immutable principles of judgement, based on the essential nature of beauty. It does not suffice them to rejoice over what, in their eyes at least, is beautiful; nor yet to make others rejoice with them. Unless they can appeal to some critical canon, abstract and universal, their personal estimates of aesthetic value seem of small account. Nor is it enough for them that they should be right. To complete their satisfaction, those who differ from them must be wrong.

This is perfectly natural. No one willingly believes that what he greatly admires is admirable only for him. We all instinctively lean to the opinion that beauty has 'objective' worth, and that its expression, whether in nature or in art, possesses, as of right, significance for the world at large. Yet how is this possible? It is not merely that no code of critical legislation seems to be forthcoming. The difficulty lies deeper. If we had such a code, what authority could it claim? To what objective test can judgement about beauty be made amenable? If a picture or a poem stirs my admiration, can there be any meaning in the statements that my taste is bad, and that if I felt

rightly I should feel differently? If there be a meaning, what is it?

In dealing with this fundamental question we must, I think, distinguish. There *are* kinds of aesthetic excellence to which, in a certain sense, we can apply an 'objective' test; though they are neither the highest kinds of excellence nor the most important from the point of view of theory. I might cite as examples technical skill, workmanship, the mastery over material and instruments, and kindred matters. These are more or less capable of impersonal measurement; and I cannot doubt either that the pleasure they give to the sympathetic observer is very great, or that it belongs to the same genus, if not the same species, as aesthetic feeling in its more familiar and higher meaning.

Some may think it dishonouring to beauty thus to class it with technical skill. Others, forgetful that Fine Art is the distant cousin of sport, may think it dishonouring to the technical skill required of the poet, the painter, or the musician, to compare it with that required of the cricketer or the billiard-player. There is no doubt an all-important difference between them. In the case of games, the pleasures which the sympathetic observation of great skill produces in a competent spectator are

unaffected by the result; for, beyond itself, true sport has, properly speaking, no result. Victory and defeat are subordinate incidents. The final cause of games is the playing of them. In Art, on the other hand, skill is a means to an end; and if the end be not attained there is apt to arise a certain feeling of dissatisfaction. Dexterous versification which does not result in poetry, admirable brush-work expressing a mean design, may in their degree give pleasure; but it is pleasure marred by the reflection that the purpose for which versification and painting exist has not, in these cases, been accomplished.

However this may be, my contention is that the pleasure given by the contemplation of technical dexterity is aesthetic, and that technical dexterity itself is capable of objective estimation. In games of pure skill it is certainly so. He plays best who wins. The scorer is an infallible critic; and his standard of excellence is as 'objective' as any man could desire. In other cases, no doubt, the measure of technical merit may not be so precise. It may be hard, for example, to decide which member of a hunt rides best across country, or which composer shows the greatest mastery of counterpoint and fugue. Yet these also are questions more or less capable of 'objective' estima-

tion. The trained critic, be it in the art of riding or in contrapuntal conventions, may, by the application of purely impersonal tests, make a tolerably fair comparison. Familiar with the difficulties which have to be met, he can judge of the success with which they have been surmounted. Basing his estimate, not on feeling but on knowledge, he can measure aesthetic qualities by a scale which is not the less 'objective' because it may often be uncertain in its application.

Here, then, are aesthetic qualities (I have taken artistic workmanship as an example) which have a known reality apart from aesthetic feeling, and which can be independently measured. Of these it is possible, in a certain loose sense, to say that the man who admires them is right, and the man who does not admire them is wrong: that the one sees excellence when it is there, while the other does not. But when we pass from qualities like these, through doubtful and marginal cases, to the qualities we call 'sublime', 'beautiful', 'pathetic', 'humorous', 'melodious', and so forth, our position is quite different. What kind of existence are they known to possess apart from feeling? How are they to be measured except by the emotions they produce? Are they indeed anything but those very emotions illegitimately 'objectified', and assumed to be per-

manent attributes of the works of art which happen in this case or that to excite them?

Questions of this kind have, I suppose, haunted all those who cannot accept canons of criticism based on precedent or authority. And many are the devices adopted, or hinted at, by which the sceptical individualism, which these doubts suggest, may be removed or mitigated.

Of such devices the most familiar is the assumption that, however impossible it may be to discover in what beauty consists, it is quite unnecessary to do so, since there is a common agreement as to the things which are in fact beautiful. Though the naturalist may not be able to define life, yet the world is not embarrassed to distinguish the living from the dead. Though there are many colour-blind people among us, yet the world judges with practical security that the flowers of a geranium are red and its leaves green. In like manner (it is thought) the world recognizes beauty when it sees it, unmoved either by the dissent of negligeable minorities, or by the imperfections of aesthetic theory.

These analogies, however, are misleading. Biologists may be perplexed about the mystery of life, but they can always tell you why they regard this body as living, and that one as dead. Their canons

of judgement have 'objective' value, and are as applicable to new cases as to old. The aesthetic critics of whom I am speaking make no such claim. They do not pretend to catalogue the external attributes by which the objective presence of the higher kinds of beauty can be securely established, which are never present when it is absent, or absent when it is present. They are always reduced in the last resort to ask, 'Does this work of art convey aesthetic pleasure?'—a test which, on the face of it, is subjective, not objective.

So also with regard to colour. There are of course persons of abnormal vision to whom the flower of a geranium appears to possess very much the same hue as its leaves. But this throws no doubt on what ordinary men mean either by the sensation of red, or by a red object. The physical quality which constitutes redness is perfectly well known, and when its presence in some external body is otherwise established, it may be confidently foretold that it will produce the sensation of red in persons normally constituted. But subject to what has been said above, we know nothing of the objective side of beauty. When we say that a tune is melodious, or an image sublime, or a scene pathetic, the adjectives may seem to be predicated of these objects, in precisely the same

way as redness is predicated of a geranium. But it is not so. As I have already observed, we are merely naming the sentiments they produce, not the qualities by which they produce them. We cannot describe the higher beauties of beautiful objects except in terms of aesthetic feeling—and *ex vi termini* such descriptions are subjective.

It may, however, be admitted that if there were a general agreement about things that are beautiful, only philosophers would disquiet themselves in order to discover in what precisely their beauty consisted. But notoriously there is no such agreement. Difference of race, difference of age, different degrees of culture among men of the same race and the same age, individual idiosyncrasy and collective fashion occasion, or accompany, the widest possible divergence of aesthetic feeling. The same work of art which moves one man to admiration, moves another to disgust; what rouses the enthusiasm of one generation, leaves another hostile or indifferent.

These things are undeniable, and are not denied. But it is sometimes sought to soften the 'individualist' conclusions to which they lead, by appealing from the wild and wandering fancies of ordinary men to an aristocracy of taste; and it must in fairness be acknowledged that among

experts there is something distantly approaching a common body of doctrine about the literary and artistic masterpieces of the world. Set a dozen contemporary critics to make lists of the best books, pictures, buildings, operas, and the results will be fairly harmonious. These results (it is claimed) may be regarded as evidence that among qualified judges there is an agreement sufficient to serve as a working substitute for some undiscovered, and perhaps undiscoverable, criterion of artistic merit.

But the more we examine the character of this agreement among experts the less weight shall we feel disposed to attach to it;—and for more than one reason. In the first place, it must be remembered that the very fact of its existence has caused the cultivated portion of mankind—all who take even the most superficial interest in literature and art—to be brought under the influence of a common literary and artistic tradition. This has many consequences. It inclines some persons to assume an admiration which they do not feel for things which everybody round them thinks worthy to be admired. Others again keep silence when they cannot praise. Nothing, they think, is gained by emphasizing dissent. Why proclaim from the house-tops that some author, long since dead, does not, in their opinion, deserve the share of fame assigned to him

by accepted tradition? Let him rest. A more important effect is that the unfelt pressure of general opinion produces not merely sham professions, but genuine sentiments. Fashion, whether in clothes or operas, whether in manners or in morals, (as I have shown elsewhere) is an influence which, though it may produce some hypocrites, most certainly produces many true believers. And tradition, though infinitely more than mere fashion, is fashion still.

These considerations require us largely to discount the agreement prevalent in current estimates of literature and art. But there is a more important point still to be noted, which yet further diminished the value of any conclusions which that agreement may seem to support. For we are bound to ask how deep the agreement goes even in the cases where in some measure it may be truly said to exist. Do critics who would approximately agree in their lists of great artists, agree as to the order of their excellence? Do men of 'trained sensibility' feel alike in the presence of the same masterpiece? I do not believe it. The mood of admiration aroused by style, by technical skill, by the command of material and instruments, may well form a common ground where competent critics will find themselves in decent agreement. But as the

quality of aesthetic emotion rises, as we approach the level where the sentiment of beauty becomes intense, and the passion of admiration incommunicable, there is not—and, I believe, cannot be—any real unanimity of personal valuation. On these high peaks men never wander in crowds: they whose paths lie close together on the slopes below, perforce divide into diminishing companies, as each moves upwards towards his chosen ideals of excellence.

If any man doubt that the agreement among experts is in some degree artificial, and in some degree imaginary, let him turn for a moment from the critics who have created our literary and artistic tradition to the men of genius who have created Literature and Art. No one will deny that they were men of 'trained sensibility': no one will maintain that they were agreed. So little, indeed, have they been agreed, that the law of change prevailing through certain important periods of artistic history seems to be based on their disagreement. Successive epochs, which show little difference in other elements of culture, yet often differ vehemently in their aesthetic judgements. Action is followed by reaction. A school, at one moment dominant, gradually decays, and is succeeded by another of sharply contrasted characteristics. The art-producing fields get wearied, as it were, of a crop too

often sown; their harvests dwindle; until in the fullness of time a new vegetation, drawing upon fresh sources of nourishment, springs suddenly into vigorous and aggressive life.

Now, in looking back, either on revolutions like these, or on other less abrupt but equally important changes, of which the history of Literature and Art shows so many examples, we must not, for the purposes of the present argument, take up the position of the eclectic critic who, calmly appreciative and coldly just, sees merits in every school and is impassioned over none. All that my argument requires is proof that the judgements of great writers and artists, especially when they are untamed by the orthodoxies of tradition, show none of that agreement of which we are in search. Wordsworth on the eighteenth century, Boileau on the sixteenth, Voltaire on Shakespeare, the French romantics on the French classics, the Renaissance on the Middle Ages, are familiar illustrations of the point. And if further evidence be required, note how rarely eminent critics endeavour to lead opinion upon new artistic developments, and how rarely, when they do, they succeed in anticipating the verdict of posterity—so hesitating is their tread, so wandering their course, when they cannot lean on a tried tradition.

The same sharp division of taste among those who practise an art, somewhat smoothed over and blurred by those who subsequently comment on it, is illustrated (it seems to me) by the history of Gothic architecture. All know well the spectacle of some great cathedral slowly grown to completion through the labours of successive generations. We neither find, nor expect to find, that the original design has been followed throughout. On the contrary, each succeeding school has built its share of work in its own style. The fourteenth-century architect does nothing as it would have been done could the twelfth-century architect have had his way; and the fifteenth century treats the fourteenth, as the fourteenth treated its predecessors. We praise the mixed result, and doubtless we do well. But we make, I believe, a great mistake if we attribute to the mediaeval artists our own mood of universal, if somewhat ineffectual, admiration. Their point of view was, probably, very different. If they refused to build in the old manner, it was because they thought the new manner better. They thought well of themselves and poorly of their forefathers. They had the intolerance which so often accompanies real creative power. This at least is my conjecture. What is not a matter of conjecture but of certainty is the way in which the different

schools of mediaeval architecture were collectively condemned by their successors. The barbaric extravagance of Gothic design was a commonplace of criticism until the Gothic revival which formed part of the romantic movement.

Music, however, is the art which perhaps most clearly shows how futile is the search for agreement among men of 'trained sensibility'. It is indeed an art which, I may parenthetically observe, has many peculiar merits as a subject of aesthetic study. It makes no assertions; so its claims on our admiration can have nothing to do with 'the True'. It serves no purpose; so it raises no question as to the relation between 'the beautiful' and 'the useful'. It copies nothing; so the aesthetic worth of imitation and the proper relation of Art to Nature are problems which it never even suggests. From the endless controversies about Realism, Idealism, and Impressionism, with which the criticism of other arts have been encumbered, musical criticism is thus happily free: while the immense changes which have revolutionized both the artistic methods and the material resources of the musician—changes without a parallel either in literature, in painting, in sculpture, or even in architecture—have hindered the growth of an orthodox tradition. Music thus occupies in some respects a place apart: but its theoretic

importance cannot on that account be ignored. On the contrary, it becomes all the more imperative to remember that no aesthetic principle which fails to apply to it can be other than partial and provincial. It can never claim to be a law governing the whole empire of artistic beauty.

That collisions of expert taste abound in the history of music will be generally admitted. But leaving on one side minor oscillations of opinion, let us take, as an illustration of our point, the contrast between the beginning and end of the period during which music has played a known part in European culture.

The contrast is certainly most striking. Our knowledge of ancient music is unsatisfactory: but it seems to be admitted that among the Greeks harmony, in the modern sense, was scarcely used, and that their instrumentation was as rudimentary as their harmony. Of their compositions we know little. But it is plain that, however exquisite may have been the airs rendered by means so modest as these, their charms to modern ears would be thin and colourless compared with those that modern music itself is able to convey,—not because the Greek genius was inferior, but because it had not the means, in this particular art, of giving itself full expression. Titian limited to a lead pencil.

Now this observation, taken by itself, is not, of course, relevant to my present argument. It becomes significant only when we compare it with the view the Greeks themselves took of their own music. To us it seems that this was the one branch of artistic production in which they did not attain a certain mature perfection.[1] Even if we assume that they did all that could be done with the means at their disposal, we must still suppose that the poverty of those means most fatally limited their powers of artistic creation. But this does not seem to have been their own opinion. On the contrary, while the architect was counted as little better than a skilled artisan, the musician ranked with the poet. Music itself they put high among the arts. They devoted endless labour to its theory, and their accounts of its emotional effect would seem exaggerated in the mouths of those familiar with the most impassioned strains of modern composers, aided by all the resources of a modern orchestra. That any tunes, rendered in unison by voice or lyre or pipe, or all three together, should be thought by grave philosophers so moving as to be a danger to society appears incredible. It seems, nevertheless, to have been the fact.

If so, it is a fact which irresistibly suggests that

[1] To be sure we know nothing worth knowing of their painting.

the most artistic race the world has seen rated aesthetic values on a scale quite different from our own. Of their literature and their architecture we know much; of their sculpture we know something. Of their music it may be thought that we know nothing. But we know both the ardour with which it was cultivated, the esteem in which it was held, and its narrow limitations. And this knowledge is sufficient to prove my thesis. No one can seriously suppose that if he were suddenly transported to the Athens of Phidias and Sophocles, he would count the Greek musician as worthy of a place beside the Greek sculptor and the Greek poet!

I will not further multiply proofs of the deep differences by which trained taste is divided. I doubt whether, on reflection, any one will seriously question the fact, whatever he may think of the particular illustrations by which I have endeavoured to establish it. A more fundamental question, however, remains behind. What title has the opinion of experts to authority in matters aesthetic? Even if it showed that agreement in which it is so conspicuously lacking, why should men endeavour to mould their feelings into the patterns it prescribes? In the practical affairs of life we follow those who have made a special study of some

particular problem, only because they have greater knowledge than ourselves of the relevant facts. But in the region of Aesthetics, what are the relevant facts? If the worth of beauty lie in the emotion which it occasions, special knowledge can only be of importance when it heightens that emotion. It may be a stimulus, but how can it be a guide?

Now, as I have already pointed out, there are many cases where special knowledge does serve to heighten emotion; indeed, there are cases where, without that knowledge, no emotion would be felt at all. The pleasure consciously derived from masterly workmanship is one case in point. Another is, where a work of art seems nearly unmeaning, considered out of its historical setting, and yet shines with significant beauty when that setting has been provided for us by the labours of the critic.

But is there not another side to this question? Does not the direct appeal made to uncultivated receptivity by what critics would describe as very indifferent art, sometimes produce aesthetic emotion which, measured by its intensity, might be envied by the most delicate connoisseur? Who shall deny that the schoolboy, absorbed in some tale of impossible adventure, incurious about its author, indifferent to its style, interested only in the breathless

succession of heroic endeavours and perilous escapes, is happy in the enjoyment of what is Art, and nothing but Art? If to those of riper years and different tastes the art seems poor, does that make it poor? Does such a judgement condemn either writer or reader? Surely not. The writer, to be sure, may be something less than Homer: but the spirit of the reader, simple, credulous, enjoying, is the spirit in which, of old, before criticism was born, some Greek king and his high-born guests listened to the tale of Troy and the wanderings of Ulysses.

I do not, of course, either say or think that the pleasures of Art diminish as the knowledge of Art augments. Some loss there commonly is, as men grow old and learned, yet we may hope that in most cases it is compensated a hundred-fold. But it is not always so. In popular usage the very word 'criticism' suggests the detection of faults and the ignoring of merits; in popular esteem the refusal to admire marks the man of taste. This singular view, which suggests the inference that artistic education is an instrument for making men fastidious and preventing them being happy, derives, it may be, some faint support from facts. Are there not persons to be found who have sharpened the delicacy of their aesthetic discrimination to the finest edge, yet take but small

pleasure in beauty,—who are the oracles of artistic societies, the terror (or perhaps the Providence) of rich collectors, whom no copy can deceive, nor any original delight? Surely the worst taste in the world is better than taste so good as this!

Such temperaments are rare. But even their possibility suggests a problem which seems to me most difficult of solution. If there be no objective standard of merit, and the degree of aesthetic emotion which a work of Art produces be the only measure of its excellence, how are the elements which make up that emotion to be compared? What (more particularly) is to be allowed for quality, what for quantity?—vague terms, though sufficiently intelligible for my purpose.

Consider, for example, this case. There have been in Literature—indeed, I think in all the Arts—men of delicate or peculiar genius, whose works make little appeal to the crowd, yet find at intervals through many generations a few devoted lovers. Their names may have an established place in history, and their writings be read for purposes of study or examination. But the number of those who really feel their charm is small. Count them, and they would not in a century equal the audiences which in six months are moved to tears or laughter by some popular play. Which, then, of these two,

contributes most to the aesthetic pleasures of the world—the play which, in its brief moment of favour, gives widespread delight, or the poem (if poem it be) which is long remembered but little read?

No one would give his verdict for the play. Yet why not? It is, I suppose, because we rate the delicate pleasure given by the poem as higher in 'quality', though it be smaller in 'quantity' than the commoner joys supplied wholesale by its rival. And this may be perfectly right. Beyond doubt, there are real distinctions, corresponding to such words as 'higher' and 'lower', 'refined' and 'commonplace'; beyond doubt, we cannot regard aesthetic emotion as a homogeneous entity, undifferentiated in quality, simply to be measured as 'more' or 'less'. This makes it hard enough for a man to determine a scale of values which shall honestly represent his own aesthetic experience. But does it not make it absolutely hopeless to find a scale which shall represent, even in the roughest approximation, the experiences of mankind? The task is inherently impossible; and it is made doubly impossible by the difficulty we all find in excluding irrelevant considerations. The thing to be discovered being what men *do* feel, we are always considering what, if their taste was good, they

ought to feel; what, if they were properly trained, they *would* feel; what it is best for their spiritual well-being that they *should* feel, and so forth. None of which questions, important and interesting as they are, assist us to discover or to apply a scale of values based merely on the aesthetic emotions actually experienced.

II

The conclusions so far reached are in the main negative. We have had to reject the idea that a standard of excellence can either be extracted by critical analysis from the practice of accepted models, or that it can be based on the consensus of experts, or upon universal suffrage. We must recognize that, while training is necessary to the comprehension, and therefore to the full enjoyment, of many works of art—while, in particular, the sympathetic delight in masterly workmanship can hardly be obtained without it—few aesthetic emotions exceed in intensity the simple raptures aroused in naïf souls by works which instructed criticism would often refuse to admire. And we must own that, if, defeated in the attempt to base our judgements on authority, we endeavour to base

them on general experience; if we say that *that* is the greatest aesthetic performance which gives to mankind the greatest aesthetic delight, we are brought face to face with countless difficulties; among which not the least is the difficulty of saying what *is* the greatest aesthetic delight, when the greatness which has to be measured is a value dependent on the 'quality' of the delight, as well as on its 'quantity'.

Now to those who approach aesthetics from the side of psychology, all these conclusions seem natural enough. For it is only among the simple organic pleasures—the pleasures of sense—that, as between man and man, approximate uniformity of pleasurable experience might be antecedently expected. All persons who can taste at all are agreed as to what is sweet and what is bitter; and all children, at least, are agreed that the first is nice, and the second is nasty. Maturer palates no doubt may be variously affected by the finer aspects of the culinary art; but though differences of custom between communities, and differences of sense-perception between individuals, mar the original uniformity of judgement, yet on the whole the civilized world is fairly agreed as to what it likes to eat and drink. But in the region of aesthetics conditions are very different. *There* association of

ideas plays so important a part in the creation of taste, the feeling of beauty springs from psychological causes so complex and so subtle, that we need feel no surprise at its being occasioned in different people by different objects. In the pleasures of sense we never get very far from the innate physiological qualities in which men are most alike. In the pleasures of aesthetics we are very largely concerned with the qualities in which men most vary—education, experience, beliefs, traditions, customs. The strange thing is not that there should be so little agreement in critical judgements, as that there should be so much:—though, to be sure, the agreement is, as I have already pointed out, often more apparent than real. This, however, is no consolation to those who cannot willingly part with the belief that in Art there is a 'right' and a 'wrong', as well as a 'more pleasing' and a 'less pleasing'. A theory which makes every man a law unto himself, which shatters anything in the nature of an independent standard, which barely admits the theoretic possibility of arriving at some rough estimate of the aesthetic values actually realized in experience, is to them wellnigh intolerable. It seems to make our highest ideals the sport of individual caprice, to reduce the essence of beauty to individual feeling, and in so

doing to make it no more than the transitory consequence of chance susceptibilities, or the incalculable by-product of social evolution.

The reluctance to accept such views has (often unconsciously) driven some critical theorists to strange expedients. If the dignity of Art be lowered by the instability of aesthetic values, it might, they think, be raised by an alliance with other great spiritual interests. An artist is therefore deemed to be more than the maker of beautiful things. He is a seer, a moralist, a prophet. He must intuitively penetrate the realities which lie behind this world of shows. At the lowest he must supply 'a criticism of life'. In much of Ruskin's work aesthetics, theology, and morals are inextricably intertwined. In the criticisms by smaller men, the same thing has been done in a smaller way; and *obiter dicta* based on the view that good art is always something more than art, that it not only creates beauty, but symbolically teaches philosophy, religion, ethics, even science, are constantly to be found in the purple passages of enthusiastic commentators on poetry, music, and painting.

For myself I admit that I require a mystical supplement to that strictly critical view of beauty and art with which alone I am now concerned.

But nothing is gained by pretending that we have reached the point where the two can be blended in a one harmonious system. So far as I can see we are not near it. In particular I can find no justification in experience for associating great art with penetrating insight, or good art with good morals. Optimism and pessimism; materialism and spiritualism; theism, pantheism, atheism; morality and immorality; religion and irreligion; lofty resignation and passionate revolt—each and all have inspired or helped to inspire the creators of artistic beauty. It would even (I suppose) be rash confidently to assert that the 'everlasting Yea' provides material more easily moulded to the uses of high imagination than the 'everlasting Nay'; while it is certain that cheap cynicism and petty spite have supplied the substance of literary achievements which we could ill afford to lose.

To a very different order of thought belong the vast metaphysical structures of German philosophers. Yet they also have been greatly concerned to find for aesthetics a fitting niche in the eternal framework of the transcendental 'whole'. No one will suggest that their efforts have been half-hearted, or that their task has been undertaken in other than the most serious spirit. But it would plainly be impossible properly to discuss

Beauty and Metaphysics in a lecture devoted to Beauty and Criticism. It is perhaps the less necessary to make the attempt since I do not remember that in this country, with the exception of Professor Bosanquet, metaphysicians, even those most in sympathy with the general attitude of the great transcendentalists, have dwelt at length upon their aesthetic speculations. However this may be, I cannot, for my own part, find that these have provided me with any way of escape from the difficulties which I most acutely feel. I get no aid from such doctrines as that 'aesthetics is the meeting point of Reason and Understanding', or that 'it is the sensible expression of the Idea', or that 'it is the expression of the Unconscious Will'. In truth these views labour under the disadvantage that, while they are almost meaningless to those who cannot accept the systems of which they are a fragment, they are not, I think (though I speak with diffidence), enthusiastically adopted even by those to whose general way of thinking those systems are congenial.

The result, then, of this concise survey of a great subject is negative. Apart from transcendental metaphysics, I have said enough (in my belief at least) to show that neither considered in themselves, nor in their relation to any wider outlook,

can our valuations of beauty claim 'objective' validity. We can say of a work of art or a scene in nature—'this moves me'; we may partially distinguish the elements which produce the total result and attempt some estimate of their worth separately as well as in combination; we may compare aesthetic merit in respect of quality as well as quantity, saying, for example, of one thing—'this is great';[1] of another—'this is exquisite'; of a third—'this is merely pretty', and so on. But beyond statements embodying personal valuations like these we can rarely go. We cannot devise a code of criticism. We cannot define the dogmas of aesthetic orthodoxy. We can appeal neither to reason, nor experience, nor authority. Ideals of beauty change from generation to generation. Those who produce works of art disagree; those who comment on works of art disagree; while the multitude, anxious to admire where they 'ought', and pathetically reluctant to admire where they 'ought not', disagree like their teachers.

What then, it may be asked, have I to offer in mitigation of a view which seems so degrading to emotions and activities which we rate (truly, I think) among the highest of which we are capable?

[1] 'Great' in criticism commonly expresses quality, not mere quantity.

Not much, perhaps; not enough, certainly; yet still something.

For what are the aesthetic emotions about which we have been occupied in these pages? They are the highest members of a great class whose common characteristic is that they do not lead to action. It is their peculiarity and their glory that they have nothing to do with business, with the adaptation of means to ends, with the bustle and the dust of life. They are unpractical and purposeless. They serve no interest, and further no cause. They are self-sufficing, and neither point to any good beyond themselves, nor overflow except by accident into any practical activities.

This statement is no doubt open to many misunderstandings. I will mention some, though I will not dwell on them. It may be said, for instance, that the description is incomplete in that it refers only to those who enjoy works of art, not those who create them. It deals with readers, not authors; hearers, not musicians; those who look at pictures, not those who paint them. This is true, but is surely no objection. I am concerned here with the criticism of beauty—not with its production. These are separate matters, and should be separately considered.

Again, it may be asked—how can aesthetic feel-

ings be described as essentially purposeless and self-sufficing? Does sacred art aim only at producing emotion divorced from action? Has architecture nothing to do with the adaptation of means to ends? Are military marches primarily composed for those who listen to them in tea-gardens?

But this is to confuse the object of the artist with the feelings of those who enjoy his art. Now undoubtedly the objects of the artist may be manifold. Milton, as we know, wrote *Paradise Lost* in order (among other things) to 'justify the ways of God to man'. We read him, however, for his poetry, not for his theology; and it is only with the aesthetic side of his, or any other artist's, work that we are here concerned.

But again, it may be said that, quite irrespective of the deliberate intention of the artist, the emotions he suggests may tend to foster dispositions which, for good or ill, have far-reaching effects on practice. This again is true. Most persons admit that Art may 'elevate'. It is scarcely to be denied that it may also demoralize. But this does not touch the point. We may surely hold that the use or abuse of contemplative pleasures affects character, and yet deny that these pleasures are immediately related to action.

But one further observation seems to be required

in the way of explanation. I have described aesthetic feelings as 'members of a great class'. What does this mean? What are the other members of the class? They are many, and the experiences which occasion them are infinite in their variety. Some are emotionally valueless: others are worse than valueless—they are displeasing. Of those which possess value some are closely allied to aesthetic feeling proper—for instance, the delight in what (outside art) is fitting and harmonious, the appreciation of neatness, finish, and skill. Of a different kind are the pleasures of intellectual apprehension; those, for example, which are aroused by a far-reaching scientific generalization, or the solution, brilliant in its simplicity, of some complicated and entangled problem. These pleasures may be very vivid; they may also be far removed from all practical interests. They must therefore be regarded as contemplative, though they cannot, I think, be properly described as aesthetic.

There are, however, other kinds of feeling which are closely associated with the practical side of life. These always look beyond themselves; if not prompting some action they are always on the edge of prompting it. Action is their fitting and characteristic issue. Like the feelings which I have loosely described as contemplative, they are often

intrinsically worthless, or worse than worthless. Thus the sentiment of fear, though presumably it has its uses, can never in itself be either agreeable or noble. But some emotions there are belonging to the active class which possess the highest intrinsic value of which we have any knowledge. Such is love—love of God, of country, of family, of friends. These emotions, like those of fear or appetite, will, on fit occasions, inevitably result in deeds; nor can they be considered genuine, if in this respect they fail. But they have an inherent value apart from their practical effects. We cannot measure their worth solely by their external consequences: if we attempt it, we fall inevitably into the gravest error.

The distinction, it should be observed, between these two classes of feelings does not necessarily imply that they are excited by two classes of objects. On the contrary, the same object may, and constantly does, excite feelings of both kinds. The splendours of a tempestuous sunset seen from a sheltered balcony give contemplative delight of a high order. The same spectacle, seen by a foot-sore traveller across a naked moor, may be only a spur to painful effort. A trumpet heard in a concert-room merely heightens an orchestral effect; heard in camp, it imperiously calls to arms. And

(to give one more illustration) wars and revolutions, the struggles of nations and of creeds, are one thing to a man who shares them, quite another to the man who reads of them in history. While history itself is to those who study it for sheer interest in the doings of mankind, an art, and one of the greatest;—to those who study it that they may 'learn its lessons', refute a political opponent, or pass a competitive examination, no more than a branch of useful knowledge.

Here, then, we have two great divisions of feeling, —the one self-sufficing, contemplative, not looking beyond its own boundaries, nor essentially prompting to any action; the other lying at the root of conduct, always having some external reference, supplying the immediate motive for all the actions of mankind. Of highest value in the contemplative division is the feeling of beauty; of highest value in the active division is the feeling of love. It is with these two only that I am here concerned, and it is on the comparison between them that my final contention is founded.

For what was it that occasioned, and I hope justified, this excursion into regions apparently far removed from the primary subject of this lecture? It was the desire to mitigate as far as possible the conclusions to which, in the vain search for some

standard of aesthetic excellence, we seemed irresistibly driven. I see no method of refuting those conclusions; the arguments on which they rest, to me at least, appear irresistible. But are they so very alarming? Do they necessarily lead to a perverse and sceptical individualism? Does the destruction of aesthetic orthodoxy carry with it, as an indirect but inevitable consequence, the diminution of aesthetic values? I think not. And I think not, because no such consequences follow from a like state of things in the great class of feelings which I have described as active or 'practical'. Love is governed by no abstract principles. It obeys no universal rules. It knows no objective standard. It is obstinately recalcitrant to logic. Why should we be impatient because we can give no account of the characteristics common to all that is beautiful, when we can give no account of the characteristics common to all that is loveable? It may be easy enough for the sociologist to explain in general terms how necessary it is for the well-being of any community that there should be found among its members a widespread capacity for disinterested affection. And it is not hard to show that, in the general interests, it is highly desirable that this affection should flow, in the main, along certain well-defined channels. It is

better, for example, that a man should love his own country and his own family, than some one else's country and some one else's family. But though ethical, religious, and utilitarian considerations are thus bound up more closely with our practical emotions than with our contemplative ones, we can make abstraction of them in the one case as in the other. And if we do, will it be found easier to fix a measure of the 'loveable' than we have found it to fix a measure of the beautiful? I do not believe it. We talk indeed of some person or some collection of persons possessing qualities which *deserve* our love. And the phrase is not unmeaning. It has, as we have seen, its parallel in the region of aesthetics. But love in its intensest quality does not go by deserts, any more than aesthetic feeling in its intensest quality depends on any measurable excellence. That is for every man most loveable which he most dearly loves. That is for every man most beautiful which he most deeply admires. Nor is this merely a reiteration of the old adage that there is no disputing about tastes. It goes far deeper; for it implies that, in the most important cases of all, a dispute about either love or beauty would not merely be useless; it would be wholly unmeaning.

Let us, then, be content, since we can do no

better, that our admirations should be even as our loves. I do not offer this advice as a theory of aesthetics, nor even as a substitute for such a theory. I must repeat, indeed, that so far as I am concerned, it represents a point of view which is not tolerable, even provisionally, unless there be added to it some mystical reference to first and final causes. This, however, opens a train of thought far outside the scope of the present lecture; far outside the scope of any lecture that I am qualified to deliver. For us, here and now, it must suffice, that however clearly we may recognize the failure of critical theory to establish the 'objective' reality of beauty, the failure finds a parallel in other regions of speculation, and that nevertheless, with or without theoretical support, admiration and love are the best and greatest possessions which we have it in our power to enjoy.

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