

# Preface

*Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove*

MANY ATTEMPTS have been made by writers on art and poetry to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms, to find some universal formula for it. The value of these attempts has most often been in the suggestive and penetrating things said by the way. Such discussions help us very little to enjoy what has been well done in art or poetry, to discriminate between what is more and what is less excellent in them, or to use words like beauty, excellence, art, poetry, with a more precise meaning than they would otherwise have. Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness. To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of æsthetics.

“To see the object as in itself it really is,” has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in æsthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. The objects with which æsthetic criticism deals—music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life—are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture,

this engaging personality presented in life or in a book,  
 to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it  
 give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of plea-  
 5 sure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and  
 under its influence? The answers to these questions are  
 the original facts with which the æsthetic critic has to  
 do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number,  
 one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not  
 10 at all. And he who experiences these impressions strong-  
 ly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis  
 of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract  
 question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact  
 relation to truth or experience—metaphysical ques-  
 15 tions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions else-  
 where. He may pass them all by as being, answerable or  
 not, of no interest to him.

21 The æsthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with  
 which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms  
 of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing  
 20 pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or  
 unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to  
 explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements. To  
 him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personali-  
 ty in life or in a book, *La Gioconda*, the hills of Carrara,  
 25 Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we  
 say, in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the  
 property each has of affecting one with a special, a  
 unique, impression of pleasure. Our education becomes  
 complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these  
 30 impressions increases in depth and variety. And the  
 function of the æsthetic critic is to distinguish, to  
 analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by

which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or  
 in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or  
 pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression  
 is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end  
 5 is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and  
 noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for  
 himself and others; and the rule for those who would  
 reach this end is stated with great exactness in the words  
 of a recent critique of Sainte-Beuve:—*De se borner à con-*  
*naître de près les belles choses, et à s'en nourrir en exquis* 10  
*amateurs, en humanistes accomplis.*

What is important, then, is not that the critic should  
 possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the  
 intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power  
 of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful 15  
 objects. He will remember always that beauty exists in  
 many forms. To him all periods, types, schools of taste,  
 are in themselves equal. In all ages there have been some  
 excellent workmen, and some excellent work done. The  
 question he asks is always:—In whom did the stir, the 20  
 genius, the sentiment of the period find itself? where  
 was the receptacle of its refinement, its elevation, its  
 taste? "The ages are all equal," says William Blake, "but  
 genius is always above its age."

Often it will require great nicety to disengage this 25  
 virtue from the commoner elements with which it may  
 be found in combination. Few artists, not Goethe or  
 Byron even, work quite cleanly, casting off all *débris*,  
 and leaving us only what the heat of their imagination  
 has wholly fused and transformed. Take, for instance, 30  
 the writings of Wordsworth. The heat of his genius,  
 entering into the substance of his work, has crystallised

a part, but only a part, of it; and in that great mass of verse there is much which might well be forgotten. But scattered up and down it, sometimes fusing and transforming entire compositions, like the Stanzas on *Resolution and Independence*, or the *Ode on the Recollections of Childhood*, sometimes, as if at random, depositing a fine crystal here or there, in a matter it does not wholly search through and transmute, we trace the action of his unique, incommunicable faculty, that strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things, and of man's life as a part of nature, drawing strength and colour and character from local influences, from the hills and streams, and from natural sights and sounds. Well! that is the *virtue*, the active principle in Wordsworth's poetry; and then the function of the critic of Wordsworth is to follow up that active principle, to disengage it, to mark the degree in which it penetrates his verse.

The subjects of the following studies are taken from the history of the *Renaissance*, and touch what I think the chief points in that complex, many-sided movement. I have explained in the first of them what I understand by the word, giving it a much wider scope than was intended by those who originally used it to denote that revival of classical antiquity in the fifteenth century which was only one of many results of a general excitement and enlightening of the human mind, but of which the great aim and achievements of what, as Christian art, is often falsely opposed to the Renaissance, were another result. This outbreak of the human spirit may be traced far into the middle age itself, with its motives already clearly pronounced, the care for physical beauty, the worship of the body, the breaking

down of those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination. I have taken as an example of this movement, this earlier Renaissance within the middle age itself, and as an expression of its qualities, two little compositions in early French; not because they constitute the best possible expression of them, but because they help the unity of my series, inasmuch as the Renaissance ends also in France, in French poetry, in a phase of which the writings of Joachim du Bellay are in many ways the most perfect illustration. The Renaissance, in truth, put forth in France an aftermath, a wonderful later growth, the products of which have to the full that subtle and delicate sweetness which belongs to a refined and comely decadence, as its earliest phases have the freshness which belongs to all periods of growth in art, the charm of *ascèsis*, of the austere and serious girding of the loins in youth.

But it is in Italy, in the fifteenth century, that the interest of the Renaissance mainly lies,—in that solemn fifteenth century which can hardly be studied too much, not merely for its positive results in the things of the intellect and the imagination, its concrete works of art, its special and prominent personalities, with their profound æsthetic charm, but for its general spirit and character, for the ethical qualities of which it is a consummate type.

The various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, move for the most part from different starting-points, and by unconnected roads. As products of the same generation they partake indeed of a common character, and unconsciously illus-

5 trate each other; but of the producers themselves, each group is solitary, gaining what advantage or disadvantage there may be in intellectual isolation. Art and poetry, philosophy and the religious life, and that other  
 10 life of refined pleasure and action in the conspicuous places of the world, are each of them confined to its own circle of ideas, and those who prosecute either of them are generally little curious of the thoughts of others. There come, however, from time to time, eras of more  
 15 favourable conditions, in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one complete type of general culture. The fifteenth century in Italy is one of these happier eras, and what is sometimes  
 20 said of the age of Pericles is true of that of Lorenzo:—it is an age productive in personalities, many-sided, centralised, complete. Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a  
 25 common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate. The unity of this spirit gives unity to all the various products of the Renaissance; and it is to this intimate alliance with  
 30 mind, this participation in the best thoughts which that age produced, that the art of Italy in the fifteenth century owes much of its grave dignity and influence.

I have added an essay on Winckelmann, as not incongruous with the studies which precede it, because  
 30 Winckelmann, coming in the eighteenth century, really belongs in spirit to an earlier age. By his enthusiasm for the things of the intellect and the imagination for their

own sake, by his Hellenism, his life-long struggle to attain to the Greek spirit, he is in sympathy with the humanists of a previous century. He is the last fruit of the Renaissance, and explains in a striking way its motive and tendencies.

1873.

## Conclusion<sup>1</sup>

*Λέγει που Ἡράκλειτος ὅτι πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει*

24

TO REGARD ALL THINGS and principles of things as in-  
constant modes or fashions has more and more be-  
come the tendency of modern thought. Let us begin  
with that which is without—our physical life. Fix upon  
5 it in one of its more exquisite intervals, the moment, for  
instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in  
summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that  
moment but a combination of natural elements to which  
10 science gives their names? But those elements, phos-  
phorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in  
the human body alone: we detect them in places most  
remote from it. Our physical life is a perpetual motion  
of them—the passage of the blood, the waste and repair-  
15 ing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tis-  
sues of the brain under every ray of light and sound—  
processes which science reduces to simpler and more  
elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are  
composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us:  
20 it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of  
us those elements are broadcast, driven in many cur-  
rents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing  
of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thou-  
sand resultant combinations. That clear, perpetual out-

25 <sup>1</sup>This brief "Conclusion" was omitted in the second edition of this book,  
as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose  
hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here,  
with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original meaning. I  
have dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested  
by it.

## CONCLUSION

line of face and limb is but an image of ours, under  
which we group them—a design in a web, the actual  
threads of which pass out beyond it. This at least of  
flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence,  
5 renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting  
sooner or later on their ways.

Or if we begin with the inward world of thought and  
feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more  
eager and devouring. There it is no longer the gradual  
darkening of the eye, the gradual fading of colour from  
10 the wall—movements of the shore-side, where the  
water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest—but  
the race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts of  
sight and passion and thought. At first sight experience  
seems to bury us under a flood of external objects,  
15 pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality,  
calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action.  
But when reflexion begins to play upon those objects  
they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force  
seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is  
20 loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, tex-  
ture—in the mind of the observer. And if we continue  
to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the  
solidity with which language invests them, but of im-  
pressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn  
25 and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it  
contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is  
dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual  
mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of im-  
30 pressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that  
thick wall of personality through which no real voice  
has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that  
which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one  
of those impressions is the impression of the individual

in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience  
 5 dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that  
 10 is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a  
 tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by,  
 15 what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves.

25  
 20 *Philosophiren*, says Novalis, *ist dephlegmatisiren, vivificiren*. The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood  
 25 of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all  
 30 that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes  
 5 any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a  
 10 moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those  
 15 about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful  
 20 brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view,  
 25 instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. "Philosophy is the microscope of thought." The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which  
 30 we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us.

One of the most beautiful passages of Rousseau is that

in the sixth book of the *Confessions*, where he describes the awakening in him of the literary sense. An undefinable taint of death had clung always about him, and now in early manhood he believed himself smitten by mortal disease. He asked himself how he might make as much as possible of the interval that remained; and he was not biassed by anything in his previous life when he decided that it must be by intellectual excitement, which he found just then in the clear, fresh writings of Voltaire. Well! we are all *condamnés*, as Victor Hugo says: we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve—*les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis*: we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.

1868.

THE END

## Pater’s Review of *Children in Italian and English Design*

by Sidney Colvin (London, 1872)

THIS ELOQUENT ESSAY, reprinted from the *Portfolio*, is a good specimen of that best and most legitimate sort of writing on art which has for its aim the adjustment of special knowledge of artists and their work to the needs and interests of general culture. Its subject is the treatment of children by Blake, Stothard and Flaxman, prominent examples of the temper and mode of work of a whole school of English artists three generations ago; and this gives the writer an opportunity of analysing the general characteristics of those three great designers in a very happy and interesting way. His object has been to show that “there exists what may be justly called a modern sentiment towards children and appreciation of them, in a sense in which no such novelty of sentiment or appreciation exists between grown-up people towards each other”; and again, “how that observant home-tenderness, that new, subtle and affectionate intimacy with children, of which Reynolds had first given signs in his portraits of them taken individually, had got to be part of the regular endowment of the age, and had sunk down even into the lightest incidental work and ornament in which its more finely gifted artists revealed their prevailing temper.” Sir Joshua Reynolds, notwithstanding the wonderful variety and perfection of his delineation of childish character, is excluded, because in portrait-painting the general