

THE MEANING OF BEAUTY

George Santayana in his *Realms of Essence*

says: “If a thing is beautiful, this is not because it manifests an essence (archetype) but because the essence which it manifests in one to which my nature is attuned, so that intuition of it is a delightful Exercise to my senses and to my soul.” Beauty is the attunement with an object. Insofar as we feel sympathetically with an object, we recognize it as beautiful.

According to Mr. Santayana, it may happen that we are attuned to the archetypes or essences of the ugly and the horrible. That raises a far-reaching issue as to the limits of archetypal perfections. Of absolutely ugly and imperfect things are there any such? This is a serious enough question: for, if it may be legitimately held that our natures may be attuned with the ugly and the horrible, the freedom we have to win may be postponed eternally. But it is well recognized that archetypes are all perfect, and therefore there cannot be perfect imperfects and ugly archetypes. Logically speaking, the existence of archetypes of perfect ugliness cannot be. Therefore the solution of the problem of our appreciation of the ugly and the horrible lies elsewhere than in the explanation that perfect or archetypal ugliness and evil exist. This latter are merely negations, in a world of evolution contains no perfect essence, perfect as such, but contains

no perfect essence. The world of evolution contains no perfect essence, perfect as such, but contains it as gradually seeking expression fully and completely. The ugly is what to us is alien and not expressive of our Inner core of existence. The beautiful is that which, in the external world of manifestation, responds to inner nature.

But truly speaking, the only response to our inner nature from the outer world is the real of free activity, not of either form or essence or even of matter which in nothing without form. Insofar as a person pays heed to appearance, he approaches the realms of essence, but it would not be right to say that he attains to the realms of beauty. Attunement with an object does not essentially mean attunement with its essence or form merely, but it means sympathy with the object itself as an object existing in the universe with all its soul, life form and matter, whatever the evolutionary stage of the formal manifestation of the evolutionary stage of the formal manifestation of the thing itself may be. Beauty signifies the attunement with the life of the thing and not with any of its appearances.

The ordinary conception of a beautiful thing is transcribed and limited by many artists to sensuous pleasure for the eye, their object being to produce a sensuously agreeable or pleasurable sensation. That which is beautiful is more often than not synonymous

with the desirable. The ordinary man, if he happens to be cultured, may call the “marble torsos from the pantheon beautiful”. His idea of beauty is whatever producer’s pleasurable feeling. Any complete experience of pleasure is limited by the condition of the body and by the non setting in of fatigue – with one and the same object. Now this limitation of pleasure- dependence in a definition of beauty is what we must avoid, for it would seriously imperil the nature of the beautiful and confine all aesthetic experience and artistic production to the mere representation of sensuous, erotic delight.

Forms may yield pleasure for some time, and instill some feeling of elation, but sooner or later fatigue must set in and there will be searching after fresh fields of enjoyment, for new forms to fix our affections upon. **Fatigue indicates the perishable and transitory character of being- a lack of true value and perfection.** This is a second reason why we must refuse to define beauty as the attunement with mere forms and essences.

The beautiful is not limited to the domain of the pleasurable but belongs to the entire symphony of the universe. That symphony can be realized only if one is prepared to eschew all that is alien to one’s being, all that is alien to one’s sympathy with the entire universe of experience. Confined to the limits of a select area of

feeling or emotion, it leads to fetishism in art, and the numbing of the possibilities of free creative activity.

Decadence in art is primarily due to two factors, namely, the control exercised by particular emotions to the detriment of the others, and the fatigue which follows the repetition of the same types, without any upward thrust for greater and nobler expression. It may come not only from pleasure – fatigue or erotic—fatigue, but also from the side of morals and perversion of morals, from intellect ; in fact, all that limits expression to particular types, that limits the scope of expression. And however prolific indeed may be the output within that particular scheme, the artist who limits the expression of life curbs his own intense faith in life and puts off the day of aesthetic fulfillment and fruition in himself.

The creation of ever -- renewing variety, unchecked by dogmas of limited standards which is regardless of prejudices and the vogue, is the highest function and fulfillment of artistic life.

The point that is sought here to establish is that the truly beautiful is that which is not limited to the expression of the pleasure – feeling but also includes every fundamental emotion.

To make this point clear – we admire not only artistic works which portray a landscape of quiet beauty but also those which depict the terrifying forces of the storm. We

love the joyous carefree laughter of the child even as we appreciate the pathos of the separation of lovers. The measure of appreciation is always proportionate to the ability of the artist to transmit his own appreciation of the subject, whether it be grotesque or terrible or calm and placid. The measure of appreciation is further determined by the content of the artist's own originaive power permeating the representation, the mixture or infusion of which gives the work of art the specific power of beauty itself. The secret of communication or artistic transitive splendour is more completely determined by this osmosis of the sympathy and the soul contribution of the artist into his work than by the importation of the archetypal into its structure. According to the measure in which an artist is able to make his work not merely an accurate representation but a living expression of his own personal ity the production reaches its appropriate artistic level, not otherwise. It follows that the so-called ugly is not ugly to the artist who approaches it in the sweet attitude of sympathy and unity – a sympathy not to be confused with either the civic sympathy with the unkempt and the unclean or with apathy regarding cleanliness and health ; but the ability to feel at one with the object he intuits. Unity with his own inmost nature is what he experiences as delight and representation.

Perhaps it can be better explained thus: Unless an artist in sympathy with the object he portrays and communicates that feeling, his expression is not a full expression of himself as artist. In and through the transmission of his specific feeling to us consists his superior claim to be called an artist. To experience true Beauty is not anything other than the ability to place ourselves at the level of sympathy with the object where we appreciate it and are in tune with its life. We may not like to look at an old hag; in fact we may go to the extent of hating such a figure; but an artist may produce a representation of her, of which we not only admire the technical skill but perceive a unique quality introduced by the artist which makes us admire the very thing which we previously hated. Wherein lies the influence and the secret of the charm that suffuses the picture, if not in the secret ability of the artist to transmit his own splendid sympathy with the original to us and make us feel at one with the original itself. The spiritual quality of the love that he has had for the object has been communicated to us unconsciously, lifting us to the level of appreciation of what we regarded as ugly. In this the beauty of the picture consists. The truly beautiful is thus the truly spiritual.

The characteristic flavors of the representation are not exclusively the content of the original subject, nor are it exclusively a characteristic of the artist. But pertains

exclusively to the fusion of the personal element and the subject portrayed.

Is it not then evident that all real beauty transcends the limits of the merely pleasurable and desirable; that true beauty is something more akin to the divine ability to scintillate love and sympathy and induce that same love and sympathy for creation in others? True beauty is the creation of the new and the fresh in the light of knowledge, love and intuition: in the activity of free action and in the creation of perfection in the world of forms and matter. Sympathy and unity with the life that seeks expression is the sine qua non. The truly beautiful, resting as it does on the supreme condition of intellectual and aesthetic sympathy with life, in all its phases of expression, is not to be gained expressed by Mr. Santayana:” for the forms, to be is an accident, not to be is also an accident.” Forms are the substance of expression but they are not the soul of expression.

Nor should we say that emotion constitute the essence of beauty: for, through the aesthetic feeling is akin to emotion it is more spiritual and is a feeling of exaltation and unity with the object of enjoyment. What we feel in the presence of the object of enjoyment -- a picture or poem or sculpture – is the feeling of being lifted to a rare height of sympathy or unity with those objects. It is not merely the enjoyment of their perfection of form a landscape on a clear summer’s evening we feel an at –

oneness with the landscape, we shall better understand and appreciate this quality of beauty in a picture as consisting in the superb sympathetic inducement it gives to appreciate that with we may not of ourselves be in sympathy and to attune us to it.

In this inducement to appreciate that which we perhaps hate or reject, repel or fear, consists the spirit of the appeal of art and the feeling of pleasure, and not in any other factor. It is because we have sought the beautiful only in the sensually pleasant and desirable, that we have been induced to hold that beauty mainly consists in the presentation of the general concepts or archetypes and have thus shut ourselves out from the appreciation of the Life that flows through everything and sustains everything

Not only does morality go beyond the limits of good and evil, the categorical imperative and the ought, but true beauty also goes beyond the limits of pleasure and pain, the desirable and the undesirable. The final test of a beautiful creation is whether it breathes intimate sympathy with and loves of life and reveals the uniqueness of the artist. That alone make s it an original creation.

Briefly, beauty consists in the ability to create uniquely infinitely the sympathy one feels with any object, be its appearance, ugly or repellant, terrible or sensual, fearful

or pleasing according to the ordinary canons. A beautiful picture is not a mere representation of the original (a photograph does that better), nor a mere subjective expression of the individual feeling; but it is the presentation of an original object or idea with it is the presentation of an original object or idea with unique quality of the artist visibly and inalienably suffused with it, making it quite different in effect and quite new in its appeal yet retaining at the same time the true spirit of the original.

The unique quality of beauty would seem to consist in this invaluable factor, the quality of soul that loves its object and not in the presentation of the archetypes. Neither forms nor emotions alone make for beauty, though at a superficial valuation the beautiful appears to be an appeal to emotive admiration for the formal splendour of the objects.

It follows, that , provided any individual is in sympathy with the life that expresses itself through even a blade of grass and the meanest worm that crawls the earth, he has a truer realization of the beauty of the universe than one who has affection for ideal forms and archetypes. Intuition of the intellect and aesthetic sympathy with the world – life is the primary condition for the realization of the beauty and truth of the world; and through that alone lies the possibility of attainment to the heights of harmony with world—life. For beauty as was very aptly

and finely expressed by a friend is ‘the call of Life to Life’ in ally existences.

In a truer sense than has been ever imagined one must say in conclusion that Beauty is Love and Intuition; and in its fundamental, personal expression of the individual lies its secret and delight.