THAT BEAUTY IS A STATE

It is very generally held that natural objects such as human beings, animals or landscapes, and artificial objects such as factories, textiles or works of intentional art, can be classified as beautiful or ugly. And yet no general principle of classification has ever been found: and that which seems to be beautiful to one is described as ugly by another. In the words of Plato "Everyone chooses his love out of the objects of beauty according to his own taste."

To take, for example, the human type: every race, and to some extent every individual, has an unique ideal. Nor can we hope for a final agreement: we cannot expect the European to prefer the Mongolian features, nor the Mongolian the European. Of course, it is very easy for each to maintain the absolute value of his own taste and to speak of other types as ugly; just as the hero of chivalry maintains by force of arms that his own beloved is far more beautiful than any other. In like manner the various sects maintain the absolute value of their own ethics. But it is clear that such claims are nothing more than statements of prejudice, for who is to decide which racial ideal or which morality is "best"? It is a little too easy to decide that our own is best; we are at the most entitled to believe it the best for us. This relativity is nowhere better suggested than in the classic saying attributed to Majñūn, when it was pointed out to him that the world at large regarded his Lailā as far from beautiful. "To see the beauty of Lailā," he said, "requires the eyes of Majñūn."

It is the same with works of art. Different artists are inspired by different objects; what is attractive and stimulating to one is depressing and unattractive to another, and the choice also varies from race to race and epoch to epoch. As to the appreciation of such works, it is the same; for men in general admire only such works as by education or temperament they are predisposed to admire. To enter into the spirit of an unfamiliar art demands a greater effort than most are willing to make. The classic scholar starts convinced that the art of Greece has never been equalled or surpassed, and never will be; there are many who think, like Michelangelo, that because Italian painting is good, therefore

good painting is Italian. There are many who never yet felt the beauty of Egyptian sculpture or Chinese or Indian painting or music: that they have also the hardihood to deny their beauty, however, proves nothing.

It is also possible to forget that certain works are beautiful: the eighteenth century had thus forgotten the beauty of Gothic sculpture and primitive Italian painting, and the memory of their beauty was only restored by a great effort in the course of the nineteenth. There may also exist natural objects or works of art which humanity only very slowly learns to regard as in any way beautiful; the western æsthetic appreciation of desert and mountain scenery, for example, is no older than the nineteenth century; and it is notorious that artists of the highest rank are often not understood till long after their death. So that the more we consider the variety of human election, the more we must admit the relativity of taste.

And yet there remain philosophers firmly convinced that an absolute Beauty (*rasa*)[1] exists, just as others maintain the conceptions of absolute Goodness and absolute Truth. The lovers of God identify these absolutes with Him (or It) and maintain that He can only be known as perfect Beauty, Love and Truth. It is also widely held that the true critic (*rasika*) is able to decide which works of art are beautiful (*rasavant*) and which are not; or in simpler words, to distinguish works of genuine art from those that have no claim to be so described. At the same time we must admit the relativity of taste, and the fact that all gods (*devas and Īśvaras*) are modelled after the likeness of men.

It remains, then, to resolve the seeming contradictions. This is only to be accomplished by the use of more exact terminology. So far have I spoken of 'beauty' without defining my meaning, and have used one word to express a multiplicity of ideas. But we do not mean the same thing when we speak of a beautiful girl and a beautiful poem; it will be still more obvious that we mean two different things, if we speak of beautiful weather and a beautiful picture. In point of fact, the conception of beauty and the adjective "beautiful" belong exclusively to æsthetic and should only be used in æsthetic judgment. We seldom make any such judgments when we speak of natural objects as beautiful; we gen-

[1] *Rasa, rasavant* and *rasika* are the principal terms of Indian æsthetics, explained in the preceding chapter.

erally mean that such objects as we call beautiful are congenial to us, practically or ethically. Too often we pretend to judge a work of art in the same way, calling it beautiful if it represents some form or activity of which we heartily approve, or if it attracts us by the tenderness or gaiety of its colour, the sweetness of its sounds or the charm of its movement. But when we thus pass judgment on the dance in accordance with our sympathetic attitude towards the dancer's charm or skill, or the meaning of the dance, we ought not to use the language of pure æsthetic. Only when we judge a work of art æsthetically may we speak of the presence or absence of beauty, we may call the work *rasavant* or otherwise; but when we judge it from the standpoint of activity, practical or ethical, we ought to use a corresponding terminology, calling the picture, song or actor "lovely," that is to say lovable, or otherwise, the action "noble," the colour "brilliant," the gesture "graceful," or otherwise, and so forth. And it will be seen that in doing this we are not really judging the work of art as such, but only the material and the separate parts of which it is made, the activities they represent, or the feelings they express.

Of course, when we come to choose such works of art to live with, there is no reason why we should not allow the sympathetic and ethical considerations to influence our judgment. Why should the ascetic invite annoyance by hanging in his cell some representation of the nude, or the general select a lullaby to be performed upon the eve of battle? When every ascetic and every soldier has become an artist there will be no more need for works of art: in the meanwhile ethical selection of some kind is allowable and necessary. But in this selection we must clearly understand what we are doing, if we would avoid an infinity of error, culminating in that type of sentimentality which regards the useful, the stimulating and the moral elements in works of art as the essential. We ought not to forget that he who plays the villain of the piece may be a greater artist than he who plays the hero. For beauty—in the profound words of Millet—does not arise from the subject of a work of art, but from the necessity that has been felt of representing that subject.

We should only speak of a work of art as good or bad with reference to its æsthetic quality; only the subject and the material of the work are entangled in relativity. In other words, to say

that a work of art is more or less beautiful, or *rasavant,* is to define the extent to which it is a work of art, rather than a mere illustration. However important the element of sympathetic magic in such a work may be, however important its practical applications, it is not in these that its beauty consists.

What, then, is Beauty, what is *rasa,* what is it that entitles us to speak of divers works as beautiful or *rasavant?* What is this sole quality which the most dissimilar works of art possess in common? Let us recall the history of a work of art. There is (1) an æsthetic intuition on the part of the original artist,—the poet or creator; then (2) the internal expression of this intuition, —the true creation or vision of beauty, (3) the indication of this by external signs (language) for the purpose of communication, —the technical activity; and finally, (4) the resulting stimulation of the critic or *rasika* to reproduction of the original intuition, or of some approximation to it.

The source of the original intuition may, as we have seen, be any aspect of life whatsoever. To one creator the scales of a fish suggest a rhythmical design, another is moved by certain landscapes, a third elects to speak of hovels, a fourth to sing of palaces, a fifth may express the idea that all things are enlinked, enlaced and enamoured in terms of the General Dance, or he may express the same idea equally vividly by saying that "not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father's knowledge." Every artist discovers beauty, and every critic finds it again when he tastes of the same experience through the medium of the external signs. But where is this beauty? We have seen that it cannot be said to exist in certain things and not in others. It may then be claimed that beauty exists everywhere; and this I do not deny, though I prefer the clearer statement that it may be discovered anywhere. If it could be said to exist everywhere in a material and intrinsic sense, we could pursue it with our cameras and scales, after the fashion of the experimental psychologists: but if we did so, we should only achieve a certain acquaintance with average taste—we should not discover a means of distinguishing forms that are beautiful from forms that are ugly. Beauty can never thus be measured, for it does not exist apart from the artist himself, and the *rasika* who enters into his experience.[1]

[1] Cf. "The secret of art lies in the artist himself"—Kuo Jo Hsū, (12th century), quoted in *The Kokka,* No. 244.

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it.
Did you think it was in the white or grey stone? or the lines of the arches and cornices?
All music is what awakes in you when you are reminded of it by the instruments,
It is not the violins and the cornets . . . nor the score of the baritone singer
It is nearer and further than they.[1]

When every sympathetic consideration has been excluded, however, there still remains a pragmatic value in the classification of works of art as beautiful or ugly. But what precisely do we mean by these designations as applied to objects? In the works called beautiful we recognize a correspondence of theme and expression, content and form: while in those called ugly we find the content and form at variance. In time and space, however, the correspondence never amounts to an identity: it is our own activity, in the presence of the work of art, which completes the ideal relation, and it is in this sense that beauty is what we "do to" a work of art rather than a quality present in the object. With reference to the object, then "more" or "less" beautiful will imply a greater or less correspondence between content and form, and this is all that we can say of the object as such: or in other words, art is good that is good of its kind. In the stricter sense of completed internal œsthetic activity, however, beauty is absolute and cannot have degrees.

The vision of beauty is spontaneous, in just the same sense as the inward light of the lover (*bhākta*). It is a state of grace that cannot be achieved by deliberate effort; though perhaps we can remove hindrances to its manifestation, for there are many witnesses that the secret of all art is to be found in self-forgetfulness.[2] And we know that this state of grace is not achieved in the pursuit of pleasure; the hedonists have their reward, but they are in bondage to loveliness, while the artist is free in beauty.

It is further to be observed that when we speak seriously of works of art as beautiful, meaning that they are truly works of art, valued as such apart from subject, association, or technical charm, we still speak elliptically. We mean that the external

[1] Walt Whitman.

[2] E. G. Riciotto Canudo: "It is certain that the secret of all art . . . lies in the faculty of self-oblivion"—(*Music as a Religion of the Future*).

signs—poems, pictures, dances, and so forth—are effective reminders. We may say that they possess significant form. But this can only mean that they possess that kind of form which reminds us of beauty, and awakens in us æsthetic emotion. The nearest explanation of significant form should be *such form as exhibits the inner relations of things;* or, after Hsieh Ho, "which reveals the rhythm of the spirit in the gestures of living things." All such works as possess significant form are linguistic; and, if we remember this, we shall not fall into the error of those who advocate the use of language for language's sake, nor shall we confuse the significant forms, or their logical meaning or moral value, with the beauty of which they remind us.

Let us insist, however, that the concept of beauty has originated with the philosopher, not with the artist: *he* has been ever concerned with saying clearly what had to be said. In all ages of creation the artist has been in love with his particular subject—when it is not so, we see that his work is not 'felt'—he has never set out to achieve the Beautiful, in the strict æsthetic sense, and to have this aim is to invite disaster, as one who should seek to fly without wings.

It is not to the artist that one should say the subject is immaterial: that is for the philosopher to say to the philistine who dislikes a work of art for no other reason than that he dislikes it.

The true critic (*rasika*) perceives the beauty of which the artist has exhibited the signs. It is not necessary that the critic should appreciate the artist's meaning—every work of art is a *kāmadhenu,* yielding many meanings—for he knows without reasoning whether or not the work is beautiful, before the mind begins to question what it is "about." Hindu writers say that the capacity to feel beauty (to taste *rasa*) cannot be acquired by study, but is the reward of merit gained in a past life; for many good men and would-be historians of art have never perceived it. The poet is born, not made; but so also is the *rasika,* whose genius differs in degree, not in kind, from that of the original artist. In western phraseology we should express this by saying that experience can only be bought by experience; opinions must be earned. We gain and feel nothing merely when we take it on authority that any particular works are beautiful. It is far better to be honest, and to admit that perhaps we cannot see their beauty. A day may come when we shall be better prepared.

The critic, as soon as he becomes an exponent, has to prove his case; and he cannot do this by any process of argument, but only by creating a new work of art, the criticism. His audience, catching the gleam at second-hand—but still the same gleam, for there is only one—has then the opportunity to approach the original work a second time, more reverently.

When I say that works of art are reminders, and the activity of the critic is one of reproduction, I suggest that the vision of even the original artist may be rather a discovery than a creation. If beauty awaits discovery everywhere, that is to say that it waits upon our recollection (in the sūfī sense and in Wordsworth's): in æsthetic contemplation as in love and knowledge, we momentarily recover the unity of our being released from individuality.

There are no degrees of beauty; the most complex and the simplest expression remind us of one and the same state. The sonata cannot be more beautiful than the simplest lyric, nor the painting than the drawing, merely because of their greater elaboration. Civilized art is not more beautiful than savage art, merely because of its possibly more attractive *ethos*. A mathematical analogy is found if we consider large and small circles; these differ only in their content, not in their circularity. In the same way, there cannot be any continuous progress in art. Immediately a given intuition has attained to perfectly clear expression, it remains only to multiply and repeat this expression. This repetition may be desirable for many reasons, but it almost invariably involves a gradual decadence, because we soon begin to take the experience for granted. The vitality of a tradition persists only so long as it is fed by intensity of imagination. What we mean by creative art, however, has no necessary connection with novelty of subject, though that is not excluded. Creative art is art that reveals beauty where we should have otherwise overlooked it, or more clearly than we have yet received. Beauty is sometimes overlooked just because certain expressions have become what we call "hackneyed"; then the creative artist dealing with the same subject restores our memory. The artist is challenged to reveal the beauty of all experiences, new and old.

Many have rightly insisted that the beauty of a work of art is independent of its subject, and truly, the humility of art, which finds its inspiration everywhere, is identical with the humility of Love, which regards alike a dog and a Brahman—and of

Science, to which the lowest form is as significant as the highest. And this is possible, because it is one and the same undivided all. "If a beauteous form we view, 'Tis His reflection shining through."

It will now be seen in what sense we are justified in speaking of Absolute Beauty, and in identifying this beauty with God. We do not imply by this that God (who is without parts) has a lovely form which can be the object of knowledge; but that in so far as we see and feel beauty, we see and are one with Him. That God is the first artist does not mean that He created forms, which might not have been lovely had the hand of the potter slipped: but that every natural object is an immediate realization of His being. This creative activity is comparable with æsthetic expression in its non-volitional character; no element of choice enters into that world of imagination and eternity, but there is always perfect identity of intuition-expression, soul and body. The human artist who discovers beauty here or there is the ideal *guru* of Kabīr, who "reveals the Supreme Spirit wherever the mind attaches itself."