SOME APPROACHES TO A JUDGMENT IN PAINTING

WHEN I was honoured with an invitation to give the Rede Lecture I need hardly say that I hesitated. I had rarely given a lecture. I had written no books and for many years I had but one almost constant interest and occupation, namely, that of examining pictures. On receiving the invitation I felt that on that subject and that subject alone I might have something to say.

I do not, however, propose to inflict upon you a list of my admirations; still less should I propose even to hint at the large number of works which leave me cold or with a feeling of distaste. These questions of approval and aversion, however crucial to the amateur seriously concerned with the arts, have always

seemed to me essentially a private matter. But, it will be said, this cannot be true. Have we not been for the last century and more immersed in a stormy sea of conflict, each party asserting the absolute rightness of its judgment and the utter falseness of the other party's view of merit? Have we forgotten the indecent quarrels over the Pre-Raphaelite group of painters, the treatment of such poets as Keats, the reception of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the Wagner controversies?

Why should the field of art be so frequently a scene of bitter contests?

It may be said that man is a belligerent animal, who values little unless it be obtained by conquest. It is true also that in all important matters of daily practice there will be found those in possession and contented and those others who are envious and wish to gain at least their share. Even in intellectual matters, in science, in history, in theology, peace does not always prevail. But, I repeat, why should the field of art be invaded? Why should a matter of private enjoyment, the possession of

which deprives no one of his equal share, be obscured and buried in the fumes of contest?

Let us grant that artists, having a message to deliver, should chafe at the density of their public who prefer the old and the customary. They are bound to advocate their view. But if I am right in believing that the enjoyment of fine things is a private affair, I feel justified in asking whether the lovers of art need join in these debates. Furthermore, I am convinced that the nature of art itself forbids. If a picture or poem is indifferent and awakens no echo in the mind, let it lie. If it is to you a true work of art, study and enjoy it.

I propose in this lecture to outline some of the doctrines which have given rise to conflict, and show what I believe to be their fallacies. I shall try also to give the reasons why the very nature of the fine arts should exclude partisanship. To put it briefly, if a picture or poem is truly fine, it is its own advocate. If the observer cannot refrain from demanding from the work what it does not contain, the fault lies with the observer and he should be silent. It is the wilful

introduction of private views, abstract doctrines and personal preferences which creates the tumult and misleads the amateur.

I may be excused from entering the lists on one side or the other of the frequent conflicts in which artists and critics have been engaged during the last thirty years. I propose instead to take certain views held by distinguished writers in the past and warmly contested in their time, and I will quote first a few lines from *Modern Painters*.

John Ruskin, in the second chapter of the first volume, where he is laying down, once and for all as he believes, a definition of Greatness in Art, says: "Painting or Art generally as such with all its technicalities, difficulties and particular ends is nothing but a noble vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing."

This statement uttered by Ruskin with his accustomed passionate conviction would be as passionately denied by many to-day, if not in the past, and he himself denies its truth almost in the same breath. "It is not," he says, "however, easy either in painting or in literature

to determine where the influence of language stops and where that of thought begins. Many thoughts are so dependent upon the language in which they are clothed that they would lose half their beauty if otherwise expressed." Still, not to be defeated by his unseen opponents, he continues: "But the highest thoughts are those which are least dependent on language, and the dignity of any composition and praise to which it is entitled are in exact proportion to its independency of language or expression."

It is easy to see how the youthful Ruskin came to announce this amazing doctrine. He strongly felt—and rightly felt—that the landscapes of Turner were finer than those of his contemporaries, and his zeal prompted him to attempt to prove their superiority. He had no difficulty in pointing to the far more varied and extensive use of natural fact and natural effects by Turner than his rivals or even his predecessors exhibited in their landscapes. Did it, therefore, follow that Turner landscapes are finer pictures than those of his rivals? To Ruskin, as to Wordsworth, Nature was a

Divine Creation. It was clear then to Ruskin that one who represented in his work the most and the best of Nature must be the greatest painter, if only his medium, the means by which Nature was represented, impeded as little as possible the passage from Nature to man as observer. To reduce this medium, the language of painting, if I may so call it, to a minimum seemed in thought an easy and even necessary step. This step John Ruskin boldly took.

I would ask you to note that Ruskin's proof of the superiority of Turner's landscape and his reduction of the language, the picture itself, to a negligible minimum, rests on the same logical process as that which occurs to the occasional and intermittent visitor to a gallery. The one asks: "What is that?" "It is Dutch boors in a cellar" or "It is The Madonna and Child", replies the other. The mind has leapt past the picture to a reality. A return may be made and the picture approved for its truthfulness to reality, but the picture has been used merely as a sign and has not been

regarded in and for itself. It is little more than such perception of a door as is needed to turn the handle and enter the next room.

It is however clear that the individual work, whether picture or poem, is more than a sign, a bridge between reality and the observer. But before proceeding further with this point, I will mention another approach distinct from John Ruskin's and yet akin.

How frequently we find brilliant essays in which the writer, taking the works of an artist, draws from them as a whole certain characteristics of their maker! The assumption then is made that these characters are the full and clear expression of the artist's mind and personality. From this presumed character the writer, returning to this or that picture or poem, seeks in it, not what is there, but what of the author's character can be traced in his work. This method of approach is very frequent and perhaps inevitable. What should we do without the biographies of our great poets and artists?

A further assumption, largely fallacious also,

lies hidden in this approach; namely that the work of the artist is a pure product, without interference by chance, occasional mood or external influence. In truth, the character of the man is one thing, the character of the individual work is quite another thing. These two approaches, and others which I shall proceed to discuss, while concerned with works of art are, strictly speaking, using them for other purposes. John Ruskin was looking in the Turner landscapes for evidence of truth to Nature. The essayists are looking for evidence in the series of works of the poet or artist of certain general traits on which they may frame an image of the man. Neither look at the work in and for itself. Both pass beyond and talk of something else.

I will now turn to another approach, one most prevalent and always with us, and I will illustrate it from Sir Joshua Reynolds' famous *Discourses*.

Sir Joshua, as painter, could not waver in his conviction that the trained artist must choose what he paints and how he shall paint,

and that, in fact, the work of art must be an arbitrary choice by the artist himself. But while admitting that the artist will and should paint as he wishes, Sir Joshua could not refrain, as scholar and amateur rather than as painter, from affirming that there is one manner of painting so superior that any others are almost negligible. He asserts that the art of painting gradually reached a summit in the works of Michelangelo and Raphael in the first half of the sixteenth century, and that the art has steadily deteriorated since that time. Individual painters, the Caracci, Rubens, Nicholas Poussin, are set apart, approved, and excused for not being of the higher manner; but the thesis is maintained.

In what is Sir Joshua's thesis an error? It is, I am convinced, an error from the point of view of the artist. If he has not an inborn inclination, it is little likely that he will bring to birth much of merit except perhaps in his earliest attempts. For the amateur, it is a false approach to come to a picture with mind prepared with a canon which demands that every

work should be of a particular kind. The work of art is not an experiment according to a scientific law. Reynolds himself, with his accustomed candour, confesses that this view may be held to be on his part a prejudice. If the whole of the extant works of painting for the artist to study and the amateur to admire were confined solely to works of the Florentine and Roman schools before the middle of the sixteenth century, there would be little harm in his urgent advice. But there are other schools beside the Florentine and Roman, and other great masters beside Michelangelo and Raphael.

Furthermore, it is one thing to agree that the extant works of the old masters are the only objective standard. It is a very different thing to say that it is that style of painting which the artist should follow, if he can, and the amateur should exclusively seek and admire. Poets may be proud that there are the Homeric poems and the *Divine Comedy*, but very few would attempt to imitate them. Painters are proud that Michelangelo and Raphael have