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978-1-108-06713-3 - An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste

Richard Payne Knight

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION.



—ἔστι δὲ τοῖς εὐπορησάσι βυλομένοις προεργε το διαπορησαι καλως  
 ἢ γαρ ὑστερον ευπορια λυσις των προτερων απορυμενων εστι. Aristot.  
 Metaphys. Lib. III. C. i.

1. **TASTE** is a subject upon which it might naturally be supposed that all mankind would agree ; since all know instinctively what pleases, and what displeases them ; and, as the organs of feeling and perception appear to be the same in the whole species, and only differing in degrees of sensibility, it should naturally follow that all would be pleased or displeased more or less, according to those different degrees of sensibility, with the same objects.

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2. This is, however, so far from being the case, that there is scarcely any subject, upon which men differ more than concerning the objects of their pleasures and amusements ; and this difference subsists, not only among individuals, but among ages and nations ; almost every

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generation accusing that which immediately preceded it, of bad taste in building, furniture, and dress; and almost every nation having its own peculiar modes and ideas of excellence in these matters, to which it pertinaciously adheres, until one particular people has acquired such an ascendancy in power and reputation, as to set what is called the *fashion*; when this *fashion* is universally and indiscriminately adopted upon the blind principle of imitation, and without any consideration of the differences of climate, constitution, or habits of life; and every one, who presumes to deviate from it, is thought an *odd mortal—a humourist* void of all just feeling, taste, or elegance. This fashion continues in the full exercise of its tyranny for a few years or months; when another, perhaps still more whimsical and unmeaning, starts into being and deposes it: all are then instantly astonished that they could ever have been pleased, even for a moment, with any thing so tasteless, barbarous, and absurd. The revolutions in dress only, not to mention those in building, furnishing, gardening, &c. which have taken place within the last two centuries, afford ample illustration; and it is not the least extraordinary circumstance in these revolutions, that they have been the most violent, sudden, and extravagant in the personal decorations of

that part of the species; which, having most natural, has least need of artificial charms; which is always most decorated when least adorned; and which, as it addresses its attractions to the primordial sentiments and innate affections of man, would, it might reasonably be supposed, never have attempted to increase them by distortion and disguise. Yet art has been wearied, and nature ransacked; tortures have been endured, and health sacrificed; and all to enable this lovely part of the creation to appear in shapes as remote as possible from that in which all its native loveliness consists. Only a few years ago, a beauty equipped for conquest was a heterogeneous combination of incoherent forms, which nature could never have united in one animal, nor art blended in one composition: it consisted of a head, disguised so as to resemble that of no living creature, placed upon an inverted cone, the point of which rested upon the centre of the curve of a semielliptic base, more than three times the diameter of its own. Yet, if high-dressed heads, tight-laced stays, and wide hoops, had not been thought really ornamental, how came they to be worn by all who could afford them? Let no one imagine that he solves the question by saying, that there have been errors in taste, as there

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have been in religion and philosophy : for the cases are totally different ; religion and philosophy being matters of belief, reason, and opinion ; but taste being a matter of feeling, so that whatever was really and considerably *thought* to be ornamental must have been previously *felt* to be so : and though opinions may, by argument or demonstration, be proved to be wrong, how shall an individual pretend to prove the feelings of a whole age or nation wrong, when the only just criterion which he can apply to ascertain the rectitude of his own, is their congruity with those of the generality of his species ?

3. Is there then no real and permanent principle of beauty ? No certain or definable combinations of forms, lines, or colours, that are in themselves gratifying to the mind, or pleasing to the organs of sensation ? Or are we, in this respect, merely creatures of habit and imitation ; directed by every accidental impulse, and swayed by every fluctuation of caprice or fancy ? It will be said perhaps, in reply, that we must not found universal scepticism in occasional deviations, or temporary irregularities : for, though absurd and extravagant fashions have, at intervals, prevailed in all ages, and, in later times, succeeded each other with little interruption ; yet there are certain standards of excellence,

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which every generation of civilized man, subsequent to their first production, has uniformly recognized in theory, how variously soever they have departed from them in practice. Such are the precious remains of Grecian sculpture; which afford standards of real beauty, grace, and elegance in the human form, and the modes of adorning it, the truth and perfection of which have never been questioned, although divers other modes of producing and exhibiting those qualities have since prevailed in different ages and countries. The superiority, however, of these pure and faultless models has been invariably recognized by all; so that the vicious extravagancies and corruptions, which temporary and local fashions introduced and maintained, were tacitly and indirectly condemned even by those who most obstinately persevered in practising and encouraging them.

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4. But is it certain that this condemnation was sincere? and are not men's real feelings and inclinations to be judged of more by their practice than their professions? Established authority, both in literature and art, is so imposing, that few men have courage openly to revolt against it, and renounce all allegiance; though they may tacitly secede from its controul, and let their own taste and inclination govern them entirely in

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their practice : and that, too, by the force of habit, in a manner, and to a degree imperceptible to themselves. When we find every florid and affected rhetorician, who has successively contributed to the corruption of Greek, Latin, and English eloquence, applauding, in quaint phraseology and epigrammatic point, the simple purity of Xenophon, Cæsar, and Swift ; and condemning in others the very style which he employs, we can scarcely believe that he knew, at the time of writing, how widely the taste, which he had acquired by habit, differed from the judgment which he exercised under the influence of authority. Both Michel Angelo and Bernini were enthusiastic in their admiration, or at least in their applauses, of the Grecian style of sculpture ; but nevertheless Michel Angelo and Bernini were, in opposite ways, the great corruptors of this pure style ; the one having expanded it into the monstrous and extravagant, and the other sunk it into effeminacy and affectation. The late Sir Joshua Reynolds expressed, throughout his life, the most unqualified admiration for the works of Michel Angelo ; while both in his writings and conversation he affected to undervalue those of Rembrandt, though he never attempted to imitate the former, but formed his own style of colouring and execution entirely

from the latter; for whose merits he had the justest feeling, while he had none at all for those of the other, as his own collection abundantly proved; for the pictures which it contained of the Dutch master were all genuine and good, while those attributed to the Florintine were spurious and below criticism. His feeling was just, though his judgment was wrong; and so far he was the reverse of Michel Angelo and Bernini, whose judgment was true while their feelings were false. As the vices, however, of both these celebrated artists were more enthusiastically admired, in their respective ages, than ever the merits of either Rembrandt or Reynolds were, it may reasonably be doubted whether they dictated to, or complied with, the taste of their contemporaries: either supposition equally favours the sceptical side of the question concerning any real and permanent principles of taste.

5. In judging, however, of the works of Nature, it must be owned that there appears to have been less inconstancy; the beauties of particular kinds of trees, plants, flowers, and animals, having, I believe, been universally recognized in all ages and all countries: but, over these, it must be remembered that the power of man is more limited, nor *can* he indulge those

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partial and extravagant caprices of his taste, which he has so abundantly displayed in the productions of his own art and labour. As far, however, as he has been able, he has done it most profusely. At one time he crops the tail and ears of his dogs and horses; and, at another, forces them to grow in forms and directions, which Nature never intended: his trees and shrubs are planted in fantastic lines, or shorn into the shapes of animals or implements; and all for the sake of beauty. Happily for the poor animals, it has never appeared possible to shear or twist them into the shapes of plants, or it would, without doubt, have been attempted; and we should have been as much delighted at seeing a stag terminating in a yew tree, as ever we were at seeing a yew tree terminating in a stag. These metamorphoses of plants are not now, indeed, in fashion: but it is merely fashion that has exploded them; and as both fashions have had their respective admirers, not only among the vulgar, but among the most discerning and enlightened of mankind \*, it may rea-

\* Quid enim illo quincunce speciosius est, qui in quamcunque partem spectaveris, rectus est. Quinctil. lib. viii. c. iii.

See also Montesquieu, *Fragm. sur le Gout*. Addison, *Spectator*, No. 414; where he states, as a general position, that,



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sonably be doubted, whether either of them be at all consonant to the real principles of beauty, if any such there be. That however must be the subject of inquiry.

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6. The word Beauty is a general term of approbation, of the most vague and extensive meaning, applied indiscriminately to almost every thing that is pleasing, either to the sense, the imagination, or the understanding; whatever the nature of it be, whether a material substance, a moral excellence, or an intellectual theorem. We do not, indeed, so often speak of beautiful smells, or flavours, as of beautiful forms, colours, and sounds; but, nevertheless, we apply the epithet to a problem, a syllogism, or a period, as fami-

“ though there are several wild scenes, that are more delightful than any artificial shows, yet we find the works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of art,” which he endeavours to account for philosophically. His natural feelings, however, soon rise up against his acquired opinions; and, towards the close of the same paper, he adds, “ I do not know whether I am singular in my opinion; but, for my own part, I would rather look upon a tree, in all its luxuriancy and diffusion of boughs and branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a mathematical figure; and cannot but fancy that an orchard in flower looks infinitely more delightful than all the little labyrinths of the most finished parterre.”

This was bold scepticism for so cautious a writer in that age.

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liarily, and (as far as we can judge from authority) as correctly as to a rose, a landscape, or a woman. We speak also, and, I believe, with equal propriety, not only of the beauties of symmetry and arrangement, but of those of virtue, charity, holiness, &c. The illustrious author, indeed, of the *Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, chooses to consider such expressions as improper, and to confine beauty to the sensible qualities of things\*. But, as an ancient grammarian observed, even Cæsar, though he could command the lives and fortunes of men, could not command words, nor alter, in a single instance, the customary idiom of speech; and in this instance customary idiom has established these expressions, not only in the English, but in all the other polished languages of Europe, both ancient and modern; *καλος* in the Greek, *pulcher* in the Latin, *bello* in the Italian, and *beau* in the French, being constantly applied to moral and intellectual, as well as to physical or material qualities. It is in vain, therefore, for individuals to dispute about their propriety or impropriety; for, after all, the ultimate criterion must be common use—

Quem penes arbitrium est, et jus, et norma loquendi,

\* Part III. s. i. and ix.