

CHAPTER I.

BEAUTY.

223. **Beauty** is the power which objects have of pleasing the beholder: beautiful objects please by merely being considered; *quæ visa placent*, says St. Thomas.

Whence comes this power of an object to please? From the perfection or excellence of the object itself. Is, then, the beauty of an object the same as its excellence? It is that excellence inasmuch as it is perceived, and thus made that excellence inasmuch as it is perceived; if hidden or obscured it could not please him. Beauty is "excellence perceived," or "striking excellence"—*splendor veri*, "the brightness of reality," as Plato puts it. Hence one point is evident, that nothing can be beautiful inasmuch as it is bad or imperfect: falsehood is not beautiful, sin is not beautiful, disorder is not beautiful.

224. How, then, can **works of fiction** please, since they are false? They do not please inasmuch as they are false, but inasmuch as they are true to nature and contain beautiful characters, beautiful scenery, a beautiful plot, beautiful language, etc. But may not a vicious character be beautiful? The description of it, done with skill and fidelity to nature, may be so, but not the character itself.

225. But does not **vice** please the vicious? The mere beholding of vice does not please the mind, but a vice may please by gratifying a passion of the heart; thus, doing wrong to another may please an angry man. But the beautiful pleases *by the mere fact that it is perceived*. What-

ever gratifies one of the passions pleases, and may, therefore, be mistaken for true beauty; but it is false or only apparent beauty. True beauty pleases because its perfection is perceived and approved by the intellect.

226. We must here notice the difference between the beautiful and **the good**: A thing is good when its possession pleases; beautiful, when its very perception gives pleasure. Thus a ragged, soiled one-hundred-dollar note may please the possessor, but not the beholder.

From our definition of the beautiful so far explained another consequence follows—namely, that those things which are most perfect in themselves are also most beautiful to those who clearly perceive them. Thus inanimate things contain, as a class, the lowest degree of perfection and are least beautiful; vegetation rises higher, animals higher still; man surpasses all other material beings in excellence and in beauty, because he is intelligent; angels are higher still; God is **the highest possible beauty** to those blessed beings that behold Him as He is. If He does not always seem so to us, it is because we know Him so little, and also because we let our lower nature obscure the light of our intellect. When, in a better world, God will stand revealed to our sight as He is, our purified souls will see in Him absolute beauty, which will make us supremely happy; therefore that sight is called the **Beatific Vision**.

227. The fact that man is more perfect and beautiful than all lower beings is the reason why literature delights in **personification**—that is, in attributing to lower objects the actions and feelings of living and intelligent beings. Yet even **lower objects** have their beauty: that *color* is more beautiful which is better proportioned or adapted to our organ of sight; *straight lines* and *figures* are beautiful, as suggestive of usefulness; *curves* and *waving lines*, as combining regularity with variety; the waving line is called

the line of beauty, the *spiral* that of grace; *motion* is beautiful, as exhibiting variety and as being suggestive of life. This suggestiveness of higher beauty is founded on *associations of ideas*, and is often a source of great pleasure to the mind, even when things are beheld which are of a very inferior nature; thus the violet is suggestive of modesty, the lily of purity, etc.

228. It is certain that unity, variety, proportion, design, life, etc., are all sources of pleasure to the beholder. Some critics are of opinion that in all beauty there is **one underlying principle**. One class of writers maintain that this principle is the blending of *unity with variety*, others that the one principle is *order with due proportion*, or suitability to the faculties of the beholder. It is not clear that all beauty can be traced to one such principle; but it is certain that *the very perfection of an object*, inasmuch as it is properly considered, whether in itself or in its associations, is the real source of the pleasure produced.

229. We shall next consider **artistic beauty**. The mere reproduction by human skill of some natural beauty is doubly pleasing: first, on account of the natural beauty reproduced, and, secondly, on account of the intellectual power displayed by men in its reproduction. Thus a painted bunch of grapes which almost deceives the eye is more admired than the bunch which nature produced. And though photography gives us a more perfect likeness than drawing can do, still the latter is more admired as being more the effect of human skill and intellect. But while all correct imitation is beautiful because skilful and intellectual, still mere imitation of nature is only the lowest beauty of art. Artistic skill of a higher kind aims at the expression of more than natural beauty—namely, *ideal beauty*.

230. Now, **ideal beauty** is that higher conception of

beautiful things which the artist forms to himself by removing from them all such imperfections as would hinder the full appreciation of them, and by associating with them suggestions of greater perfection than the objects themselves contain.

231. The presentation of ideal beauty is the object of all higher art, of the **fine arts** as such. The ancients aimed at this when their painters and sculptors selected for their subjects the ideal forms of Apollo, Hercules, etc., idealizing human perfections to represent their gods and demigods. Thus, too, Homer is not satisfied with the presentation of human heroes as they really existed, but he portrayed them as the mind loves to contemplate them; and, rising even higher, he presents to us a panorama of superior ideal beings, exhibiting far more power of intellect and will than it is natural for man to possess. Thus he gives us his gods and goddesses, the most wonderful creations of the pagan mind. In fact, the tendency of all true art has ever been upward into the region of religious thought. Not until **Christianity** came to reveal to us a far higher perfection did art produce its noblest creations. The spirits, good and bad, described by Milton in his "Paradise Lost" are grander creations than Homer's; but especially the Saviour of the world, dying upon the cross or reclining upon the straw of the manger, and by His side the purest and fairest of mere created beings, the Blessed Virgin Mother, are subjects for the pencil and the pen which modern artists and poets have fully appreciated. Hence Christian art is far more elevated in its ideals than pagan art could possibly have been.