

LECTURE XV.

ON TASTE, GENIUS, AND IMAGINATION.

BEFORE we close our analysis of the faculties of the mind, there are yet three powers, that have a larger claim upon our attention than we have hitherto been able to give them. These are, the faculties of TASTE, GENIUS, and IMAGINATION; the alliance between which is so close, that many philosophers have conceived they are produced at the same moment, and cannot exist separately. This, however, is an erroneous opinion, proceeding from a want of clear ideas as to their respective characters—characters which do not appear to have been at any time very accurately defined; and the peculiar limits and distinctions of which I shall take leave, therefore, before we close this course of instruction, to fix by a new boundary.

IMAGINATION, then, is that faculty of the mind which calls forth and combines ideas with great rapidity and vivacity, whether congruous or incongruous.

GENIUS is that faculty which calls forth and combines ideas with great rapidity and vivacity, and with an intuitive perception of their congruity or incongruity.

TASTE is that faculty which selects and relishes such combinations of ideas as produce genuine beauty, and rejects the contrary.

These definitions are simple, but, I trust, correct; and if so, IMAGINATION is the basis of the whole; TASTE may exist without GENIUS, and GENIUS without TASTE, as I shall presently endeavour to show; but neither can exist without IMAGINATION. Yet imagination is neither taste nor genius, since, though absolutely necessary to the subsistence of these powers, the great mart that furnishes them with their daily food, it may also exist without them.

Let us commence, then, with the faculty of IMAGINATION. Whence comes it that the mind, at first a tabula rasa, a sheet of white paper, without characters of any kind, becomes furnished with that vast store of ideas, the materials of wisdom and knowledge, which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? The whole, as I had occasion to prove in a preceding lecture,* is derived from experience,—the experience of sensation and reflection; from what have been called objective and subjective ideas; from the observations of the mind employed either about external sensible objects, or the internal operations of itself, perceived and reflected upon by its own faculties.

Now, it is the office of the reason to hunt out for and accumulate ideas from both the above sources, as it is that of the perception to distinguish them when present, and of the memory to recall them on future occasions. And hence, he who has laid in the largest stock of ideas is possessed, not indeed of the most extensive knowledge, but of the most extensive materials of knowledge. For, in order to produce knowledge, we must not only have a numerous stock of ideas, but these ideas must be examined, compared, arranged, combined, according to their connexion and agreement, or disconnexion and repugnancy. To do this is the office of the JUDGMENT; and hence, he who has a power of making such assortment and comparison with clearness and precision is said to have a deep insight into things; which is nothing more than affirming that the faculty of his judgment is correct and acute. I have stated genius to be that faculty by which the mind rapidly or intuitively perceives the congruity or incongruity of ideas; so that genius is intuitive judgment; it is judgment that looks forward at once from the beginning to the end of a chain of ideas, and stands in little or no need of the intermediate links on which proper or common judgment depends for its guidance.

* Series in. Lecture III.

We often, however, meet with persons who have a strong and active propensity to combine ideas, without any attention to their natural agreement or connexion. And it is in individuals of this description that the imagination constitutes the ruling power, and lords it over the judgment. Such combinations are soon made, for they cost no trouble, like those the judgment engages in: and as the persons who are constitutionally prone to make them possess, perhaps without an exception, a sanguineous or irritable temperament, the nature of which I explained in a late lecture of the present series,* they are also made with peculiar liveliness and rapidity; and I have hence defined the imagination to be that faculty of the mind which calls forth and combines ideas with great rapidity and vivacity, whether congruous or incongruous.

This, however, is pure or simple IMAGINATION, and to observe it in its full force we must select and attend to those states of the mind in which it is altogether set at liberty from the control of the judgment; we must follow it up into the airy visions of sleep, the wild phantasms of delirium, the extravagant fictions of madness, or the dark reveries of melancholy. In all these states it has full play, and revels with unbounded career. And it shows us distinctly the error of those psychologists who have regarded imagination, genius, and fine taste as one and the same attribute. For here we behold the restless power of imagination enthroned without a rival in the centre of the intellectual empire, and yet unaccompanied, except perhaps in a few anomalous cases, with taste or genius of any kind. A long habit of association, in the case of dreaming and delirium, or some predominant feeling in the case of madness or melancholy, may occasionally give a certain degree of consistency or natural colouring to the ideas as they are successively imaged; and I have hence described the ideas of imagination as characterized by rapid and vivacious combinations, whether congruous or incongruous; but for the most part the consistency is only occasional and momentary; or, if permanent, limited to a single subject.

Tried by this test, I am afraid Dr. Akenside, among others, will be found to have fallen into some slight confusion in his idea of imagination or fancy (for he uses the terms synonymously), as collected from his well-known and very admirable poem—a poem in a few places, perhaps, obscure to general readers from their unacquaintance with the Platonic philosophers, but combining as much fire, and feeling, and classical elegance, and rich imagery, and sweetness of versification, as any didactic poem of the same extent in the English tongue. This poem he entitles “The Pleasures of Imagination;” and the direct scope of it is to prove, firstly, that the highest pleasures of the mind are those furnished by the imagination; and, secondly, that they are derived from the three sources of the Fair, the Wonderful, and the Sublime, as they are discoverable in the kingdoms of art and nature, and are chiefly collected and represented to us by poets and painters:—

Know, then, what'er of nature's pregnant stores,
Whate'er of mimic Art's reflected forms,
With love and admiration thus inflame
The powers of FANCY, her delighted sons
To three illustrious orders have referred;—
Three sister-graces—whom the painter's hand,
The poet's tongue confesses: the Sublime,
The Wonderful, the Fair.—I see them dawn!
I see the radiant visions where they rise,
More lovely than when Lucifer displays
His beaming forehead through the gates of morn,
To lead the train of Phœbus and the Spring.

Who does not see that, through the whole of this the poet is speaking, not of fancy or imagination in its proper and simple capacity, but of fancy or imagination under the guidance of taste and genius; and that, consequently, he confounds these three faculties, different as they are from each other, under one common name. In like manner Mr. Allison commences the second edition of his “Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste,” with the fol-

* Series in. Lecture XI.

lowing passage:—"The emotions of sublimity and beauty are uniformly ascribed, both in popular and philosophical language, to the imagination. The fine arts are considered as the arts which are addressed to the imagination, and the pleasures they afford are described, by way of distinction, as the pleasures of the imagination." Now, this may be popular language, but it is by no means philosophical. The poet as a poet may talk of the pleasures of imagination, because he limits his ideas to pleasurable objects, and submits them to the selective hand of genius and taste; but will the madman, or even at all times the lover, talk also of its pleasures? Shakspeare tells us, no; and in proof hereof gives us in his *Midsummer Night's Dream* an exquisite picture of the different subjects on which their respective imaginations are exercised:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping phantasies that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
ARE OF IMAGINATION ALL COMPACT.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all is frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine phrensy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

This, indeed, is the language of philosophy though put into verse. The madman, the lover, and the poet are described as being joint subjects to the dominion of imagination; while the general current of their ideas, from its vehemence, abruptness, and audacity, is denominated a phrensy. But the phrensy of the poet is distinctly stated to be of a superior kind to that of the rest, and is distinguished by the epithet *fine*, delicate, refined, polished; and, consequently, imports skill or regulation; taste, genius, or both together. It necessarily implies a something besides the simple imagination, that unites with and controls it; and hence accurately accords with the view of the subject now taken.

Let us proceed to the faculty of GENIUS. This I have defined to be that power of the mind which calls forth and combines ideas with great rapidity and vivacity, and with an intuitive perception of their congruity or incongruity. Genius is, therefore, in few words, imagination with intuitive judgment. It distinguishes the man of FINE PHRENSY, as Shakspeare expresses it, from the man of MERE PHRENSY. It is a sort of instantaneous insight, that gives us knowledge without going to school for it. Sometimes it is directed to one subject, sometimes to another; but under whatever form it exhibits itself, it enables the individual who possesses it to make a wonderful and almost miraculous progress in the line of his pursuit. Sometimes it attaches itself to the sweet harmony of sounds, and we then behold an infant of eight or ten years of age evincing the science and execution of an adult and finished musician. Sometimes it rejects the science of sounds, and prefers that of numbers; and we behold a boy of twelve years old solving, almost instantaneously, arithmetical questions which would cost an expert practitioner in the common way a labour of many hours. Sometimes we find it enamoured of the beauty of colours or the charms of eloquence; and we are struck with the precocity of perfection which it evinces in either case.

In other instances we see it descending to the arts and labours of common life, and diffusing intuitive knowledge among the multitude. Go to the busy 'Change; and you will find some individuals allowed by general consent to have a peculiar genius, or talent, as it is often called, for commerce; in other words, who are capable of calling forth and combining commercial ideas with great speed and vivacity, and with that intuitive perception of their agreement or disagreement which leads them to the most judicious results—results which the surrounding crowd would only be able to attain by a long catena-

tion or process of inquiry. Go into the country, and you will find the same difference among our husbandmen and agriculturists; while some among them have no more imagination than the clods they cleave with their ploughshares, others seem to penetrate intuitively the nice order of vegetation, and never suffer a season to roll over them without wringing from it some important secret; as Aristæus in the *Georgics* from the pinioned form of old Proteus. Go to our manufacturing and mechanical towns—to Manchester, Birmingham, and Sheffield, and you will, in like manner, meet with artisans and handicrafts who discover the same acuteness of intelligence, the same rapid combination of consenting ideas, the same superiority of genius or talent in their respective callings beyond that which is possessed by their fellows, as in the cases to which I have alluded already.

Genius, then, wherever it is found, and to whatever purpose directed, is mental power; it acts by an invisible impulse, and appears to act miraculously. And hence, indeed, its name—a name common to all the world—derived from the Hebrew, copied thence into the Sanscrit, Arabic, and Chinese; from the eastern tongues into the Latin, and from the Latin into our own, and almost every other language of modern Europe, and importing, in every instance, in its radical signification, a tutelary, a guiding, or inspiring divinity.

It is genius, then, that must control the imagination, if the pictures it paints be of any value, if the ideas it combines be combined skilfully or accordantly, if the feelings it excites be pleasurable, or the result it produces be beneficial.

To give full efficacy, however, to the daring flights of the imagination, there is another power of the mind which must associate with the attribute of genius, and that is TASTE; which I have already defined to be that mental faculty which selects and relishes such combinations of ideas as produce genuine beauty, and rejects the contrary.

Imagination, therefore, is as necessary to the existence of taste as of genius; since each equally depends upon this active and vivacious power for the materials with which it is to work. For the most part, taste and genius are united in the same mind, but not necessarily or always so; and hence they are by no means the same thing.

We see evident proofs of this in many of the subjects selected by the lowest class of the Dutch painters, and by several of the most eminent caricature draughtsmen of the present day. The broad laughter or other distortion of the features, which they so frequently present to us, often discovers a powerful genius in this particular line, and, as displaying the effect of muscular action, may afford to the young painter a useful study; but the ideas are too ludicrous and violent for real beauty, and have, hence, no pretensions to pure taste.

Among the whims and follies which have successively risen into notice in our own country, there appears at one time, among the lower ranks of life, to have been an odd and singular fashion for grinning. The third volume of the *Spectator* contains a paper that gives a very humorous account of this elegant rage; and informs us that grinning clubs were established in different parts of the country, grinning matches proposed, and grinning prizes adjudged to the winner. Among the competitors in this new Olympic game, there were some who seem to have been endowed with a peculiar genius for the art; and in one instance the prize fell upon a cobbler, who discovered so much accomplishment, and excited so much applause, that a hard-hearted young woman, whom he had in vain wooed for five years before, immediately gave him her hand, and was married to him the week following. Now, here, as in the Dutch paintings I have just noticed, whatever may have been the genius displayed, every one, I apprehend, will admit that it was genius without taste.

Let us, however, ascend to nobler regions. We occasionally meet with particular instances of deficient taste in persons of the most elevated genius, and whose general taste is acknowledged by every one to be sufficiently correct. As one instance, I may perhaps mention that Reubens, in his very excellent picture of Daniel in the lions' den, has given a human expression to

the faces of the savage beasts. His intention is clear; it is that of representing them as endowed with human feeling on the occasion. The conception unquestionably implies genius, but its taste will not be so readily allowed. We meet with a similar error in the battle of Constantine, by Giulio Romano, where the face of one of the horses is, for the same reason, animated with a human character, expressive of doubtful thought and suspicion; while the ears and hair of the forehead, for the sake of greater fierceness, are drawn from the features of the bull. Now, in centaurs, chimeras, and other ideal animals, this intermixture of attributes is readily allowable, for here the imagination may sport without restraint; but it is a law of genuine taste, that natural objects should have their natural characters, their proper features and expression; or, in other words, that the principle of association adhered to by nature should be adhered to by those who copy her.

Our best and most celebrated poets furnish us occasionally with similar instances of genius unaccompanied by taste. Homer himself is not altogether free from this imputation. Let me first set before you one of his most exquisite pictures, in which taste and genius equally combine. The passage I refer to is his delineation, in the eighth book of the *Iliad*, of a night-scene before Troy. Mr. Pope's is an excellent version, but I take Mr. Cowper's, as equally excellent and more true to the original:—

As when, around the clear bright moon, the stars
Shine in full splendour, and the winds are hush'd,
The groves, the mountain-tops, the headland heights
Stand all apparent, not a vapour streaks
The boundless blue, but ether open'd wide
All glitters, and the shepherd's heart is cheer'd:
So numerous seem'd those fires, between the stream
Of Xanthus blazing, and the fleet of Greece,
In prospect all of Troy.

Could it be supposed, that he who could imagine so finely, and describe so delicately, would in the same poem compare the contest of the Greeks and Trojans for the body of Patroclus, which it seems was tugged for in every direction, to a gang of carriers stretching out a hide? Or that, in his *Odyssey*, he would liken Ulysses, restless and tossing on his bed, to a hungry man turning a piece of tripe on the coals for his supper?

Now, in both these cases the similes are true to nature, and strikingly illustrative; they are full of genius, but they are destitute of taste; they want picturesque beauty. To nature, indeed, they must be true; for the merit of Homer as a painter from nature is that in which he stands most distinguished from all other poets. In variety, accuracy, and force his similes greatly surpass those of any of his successors and imitators; and they form a gallery of delineations which the student of poetry and the cultivator of genius cannot survey with too much attention:—

Be Homer's works your study and delight,
Read them by day, and meditate by night;
Thence form your judgment, thence your maxims bring,
And trace the muses upwards to their spring.*

In looking very lately over the satires of Dr. Young, which, upon the whole, are written with great force and truth of character, I could scarcely avoid smiling at a simile which, like the preceding, is exact enough in itself, but highly ludicrous from its utter deficiency of taste. In describing the man whose whole pursuits are made up of nothing but trifling and empty joys, he compares him to a cat in an air-pump. Now, this might have been well enough in *Hudibras*, or any other burlesque poem; but is altogether inconsistent with a vein of serious composition. In the following comparison, on the contrary, he is highly ingenious and successful; and we admire the adroitness with which he brings into various points of resemblance ideas that

* Art of Criticism.

at first sight appear to be perfectly discrepant; for quicksilver and pleasure do not seem to have any natural connexion:—

Pleasures are few, and fewer we enjoy:
Pleasure, like quicksilver, is bright and coy;
We strive to grasp it with our utmost skill,
Still it eludes us, and it glitters still.
If seiz'd at last, compute your mighty gains,
What is it but rank poison in your veins?

There is no subject that has been more frequently made choice of by dramatic writers than the story of *Œdipus Tyrannus*. We owe it, in the first instance to Sophocles; and the best copies of it in modern times are those by Corneille and Voltaire. It is unquestionably full of suspense, agitation, and terror; and particularly of that incident in a plot which by the Greeks was termed *anagnorisis*, or the discovery of a person to be different from what he was taken to be. Yet, as a whole, there has always appeared to me to be far more genius in the conduct of the fable than there is of real taste or beauty. The story is, in few words, as follows:—An innocent person, and, in the main, of a virtuous character, through no crime of himself or of others, but by mere fatality and blind chance, is involved in the severest train of all human miseries. In a casual rencounter he kills his father, without knowing him; he afterward, with equal ignorance, marries his own mother; and at length, discovering that he had committed both parricide and incest, he becomes frantic, and dies in the utmost misery. Such a subject excites horror rather than pity. As conducted by Sophocles, it is, indeed, extremely affecting, but it conveys no instruction; it awakens in the mind no tender sympathy; it leaves no impression favourable to virtue or humanity.* It is without the moral for which tragedy was invented.

Genius, then, may exist without taste; in like manner, taste may exist without genius. Of this we meet with a thousand instances every day of our lives. How countless are the numbers that are perpetually poring over the elegant and picturesque poems of Lord Byron and Mr. (now Sir) Walter Scott; or that are perpetually hurrying to Mr. West's impressive picture of the "Healing the Sick in the Temple;" or that of "Christ Rejected;" entering with the nicest feelings into the various groupings, characters, and scenery which are so exquisitely presented to them; and who, nevertheless, though endowed with a taste that enables them to relish such excellences, have no genius whatever that could either invent or copy them. In like manner, I have occasionally met with men, who for strength of feeling and elegance of taste are almost unrivalled, and whom the world has long regarded, and justly so, as among the finest critics of the present day on subjects of polite literature; yet, notwithstanding such possession of exquisite and acknowledged taste, who have never been successful in the exercise of genius, and have uniformly failed in poetry and original fiction. It is rarely that taste and genius do not coexist in the same mind; but it is also rarely that they coexist in an equal degree. Ariosto and Shakspeare excel in genius; Tasso and Racine in taste. Mr. Windham had as much genius as Mr. Burke; his imagination was as vivacious and rapid, his combination of congruous ideas as instantaneous, his wit, perhaps, even more ready and brilliant—but Mr. Burke was vastly his superior on the score of taste.

Taste and genius cannot but be favourable to virtue. They cannot exist conjointly without sensibility. While it is of the very essence of vice to have its feelings blunted, its conscience seared, their pleasures are notoriously derived from elevated and virtuous sources. There may, perhaps, be a few exceptions to the remark, but I am speaking of the general principle. The lovely, the graceful, the elegant, the novel, the wonderful, the sublime—these are the food on which they banquet; the grandeur and magnificence of the heavens—the terrible majesty of the tempestuous ocean—the romantic wildness of forests, and precipices, and mountains that lose themselves in the

* See Blair's Lectures, vol. iii. sect. xlvii.

clouds—the sweet tranquillity of a summer evening—the rural gayety of vineyards, hop-grounds, and cornfields—the cheerful hum of busy cities—the stillness of village solitude—the magic face of human beauty—the tear of distressed innocence—the noble struggle of worth with poverty, of patriotism with usurpation, of piety with persecution;—these, and innumerable images like these—tender, touching, dignified—are the subjects for which they fondly hunt, the themes on which they daily expatiate. To say nothing of the higher banqueting, “the food of angels,” that religion sets before them.

It is true, that the mind thus constituted has its pains as well as its pleasures, nor are its pains few or of trifling magnitude. Wherever misery is to be found it seeks for it with restless assiduity, broods over it, and shares it; and where it is not to be found it fancies it. How often, waking to the roar of the midnight tempest, while dull and gluttonous indolence snores on in happy forgetfulness, does the imagination of those who are thus divinely gifted mount the dizzy chariot of the whirlwind, and picture evils that have no real existence; now, figuring to herself some neat and thrifty cottage where virtue delights to reside, she sees it swept away in a moment by the torrent, and despoiled of the little harvest just gathered in; now, following the lone traveller in some narrow and venturesome pathway, over the edge of Alpine precipices, where a single slip is instant destruction, she tracks him alone by fitful flashes of lightning; and at length, struck by the flash, she beholds him tumbling headlong from rock to rock, to the bottom of the dread abyss, the victim of a double death. Or, possibly, she takes her stand on the jutting foreland of some bold, terrific coast, and eyes the foundering vessel straight below; she mixes with the spent and despairing crew; she dives into the cabin, and singles out, perhaps, from the rest, some lovely maid, who, in all the bloom of recovered beauty, is voyaging back to her native land from the healing airs of a foreign climate, in thought just bounding over the scenes of her youth, or panting in the warm embraces of a father's arms:—

She marks th' erected ear the bloodless cheek,
The rigid eye that never more shall weep;
She hears the horrors of the last loud shriek,
And sees the vessel plunge beneath the deep.

Such are the painful pictures on which the keen soul of sensibility feeds too frequently in imagination, when the sigh of real misery is hushed, and its generous hand is not needed. But is there nothing to counterbalance the distress? To call forth the tear of joy, as well as of sorrow? And to reward the nice sympathy with which the mind labours? I pursued this pleasing train of contemplation, many years ago, in an elegy expressly directed to the present subject, from which, indeed, I have taken the lines just quoted; and, as I do not know that I can answer this important question in prose better than in verse, I will beg leave to close the lecture, and with it the general task I have undertaken, with an additional extract. Having pointed out to those who are highly gifted with taste, genius, imagination, and fine feeling, the pains and anxieties which such a constitution of mind must necessarily give rise to, the poem proceeds as follows:—

Yet murmur not, nor deem the fates reserve,
No drop of solace mid the bitter stream;
Virtue is yours,—and still each trembling nerve
Oft proves an avenue to bliss supreme.

Ye cannot wade through filth that dulness dares;
Your nobler spirits soar above the clod:
Ye must be pure, while yet your bosom bears
The clear, unsullied impress of your God.

Nor does the world, in every scene that springs,
Nor Fancy's self, portray perpetual gloom.
Feel ye no joy when sickness smiles and sings?
When worth succeeds? or culprits meet their doom?

Lo! where you vale unfolds its pictur'd site,
And meads and cornfields mix their gay attire;
Sheep-cots and herds, and sprinkled cottage white,
Stream, busy mill, deep wood, and tufted spire.

Can ermin'd gullt, when every scheme succeeds,
Feel half the joy that stirs your generous breast,
As, pleas'd, ye ponder o'er these simple meads,
Compute their charms, and share their balmy rest?

And mark, untouch'd by city broils, the reign
Of rural comfort, cheerfulness, and ease;
Of health, embloom'd from every sweet-brier lane,
And faith and morals wholesome as the breeze.

Go—climb yon castled cliff that meets the sky,
And tells of times tradition cannot reach;
And o'er the ruins, as ye throw your eye,
Of rocks and towers, with many a hoary breach,

Say—does the wreck of nature and of art,
The wild cascade, and echo undefin'd,
The grandeur, and the solitude impart
No pleasing train of image to the mind?

Or would ye change, for all that wealth can stake,
Ambition's plume, or lawless Pleasure's prime,
The feelings, then, that through the bosom wake,
And rouse the soul to ecstasies sublime?

Yet these—and countless sympathies like these,
Of purest zest, are yours, and yours alone:
Guilt knows them not, nor dull unwieldy Ease,
For Sensibility and Taste are one.

And well, thus gifted, may ye bear the thrill
Of social sorrows and ideal wrong;
Th' Eolian harp that heaven's pure breezes fill,
Must breathe, at times, a melancholy song.

THE END.

