CHAPTER VI.

THE IDEAL IN THOUGHT.

I.

1. A GENIUS conceives and expresses a great thought. The conception so expressed delights. It enters men's souls; it compels their admiration. They applaud and are rejoiced that another masterpiece has been brought into existence to grace the world of art or letters. The genius alone is dissatisfied. Where others see perfection, he perceives something unexpressed beyond the reach of his art. Try as best he may, he cannot attain that indefinable something. Deep in his inner consciousness he sees a type so grand and perfect that his beautiful production appears to him but a faint and marred copy of that original. That original is the ideal; and the ideal it is that appeals to the Æsthetic Sense, and calls forth men's admiration.

2. An analysis of this admiration will lead us to an understanding of the ideal. It is universal. The Æsthetic Sense is as innate to man as is his physical sense of taste or touch. Savage and civilized admire whatever appeals to their admiration. Now, not everything does so appeal. The trivial, the contemptible, the weak, the inferior, are all beneath man's sense of admiration. The virtuous,

the noble, the heroic; whatever expresses strength or power; whatever is beautiful or sublime; in a word, whatever raises man's thoughts and aspirations to a superior plane, — that is for him an object of admiration. Man has within him two opposing elements. One seeks to raise him up into a spiritual and spiritualizing sphere of thought and action; the other tends to drag him down to things earthly and debasing. They are the two steeds that Plato represents the soul as driving, likening it to a charioteer; one steed "leans and presses heavily towards the earth, if he be not well-trained by his charioteer;" the other is "beautiful and noble and of a godlike character."[1] They are the opposing elements — the law in his members fighting against the law of his mind — of which St. Paul speaks in language less allegorical.[2] Now, it is the function of this sense of admiration to raise up and spiritualize the inferior parts of man's nature, so that they grovel not in things earthly, and to strengthen and improve his nobler aspirations. Where man may not imitate, where he may not even love, he can still admire. Wherever an ideal is expressed, there is an object for his admiration. We may not be able to explain this mysterious relation, but we all have the experience of it. Our souls are so attuned as to give out a music responsive to the chords that are touched. This we know and feel. Let us study the impression.

3. Take a Rafael or a Murillo. We gaze upon

[1] Plato, *Phædrus*, cap. xxv. p. 712, t. i. ed. Hirschigii.

[2] Romans vii. 23.

the painted canvas till its beauty has entered our soul. The splendor of that beauty lights up within us depths unrevealed, and far down in our inner consciousness we discover something that responds to the beauty on which we have been gazing. It is as though a former friend revealed himself to us. There is here a recognition. The more careful has been our sense-culture, the more delicately have our feelings been attuned to respond to a thing of beauty and find in it a joy forever, all the sooner and the more intensely do we experience this recognition. And therewith comes a vague yearning, a longing as for something. What does it all mean? The recognition is of the ideal. "The memory," says Plato, "on beholding the beautiful object, is carried back to the nature of absolute beauty."[1] Thus, there is not only a recognition; there is also a reminiscence of a higher spiritual order of things of which the soul has had occasional glimpses; there is a yearning for the home to which it belongs. Cavil as men may, the artistic ideal is an essential element in art work and art criticism; it speaks to something higher than the material sense; it tells of something more than technical detail and exquisite finish. There are moments when, beneath the spell of some great masterpiece, man feels the nearness of the Godhead, and his soul is thrilled with emotions that vibrate beneath the divine touch. There is no denying what is a universal experience. "The ideal," says Charles Blanc, "is the primitive divine exemplar of all things; it is,

[1] *Phædrus*, cap. xxxv. p. 718.

so to speak, a reminiscence of having already witnessed perfection, and the hope of seeing it once again."[1] Charles Blanc is only repeating the magnificent definition of the ideal which has come home to every soul not buried in the inert material, and which has been echoed down the ages ever since Plato gave it expression: "It is," says this wonderful seer, "a recollection of those things our soul formerly beheld when in company with God, despising the things that we now say are, and looking upward towards that which really is."[2] Without admitting the Pythagorean doctrine of a preëxistent state, here implied, we may go farther, and say that without the ideal there is no reality.

4. Nature recognizes the ideal. She has her types, and works by them. Each of her products is a specific realization of a separate type. As genus is a reality, distinct from, and causative of, the species, so is each of Nature's types a reality, distinct from the concrete thing fashioned after it and causative thereof. Hence it is that, in the animal and even in the vegetable world, we daily witness reversions to older types and the reproduction of ancestral traits of character. Nor is this all. Ascending higher still

> "Upon the great world's altar-stairs
> That slope through darkness up to God,"

we come to the prototype of all created types, and find it existing in the Word. Here is the source

[1] See M. Edouard Pailleron's "Discours sur Charles Blanc dans l'Académie," *Le Temps*, 18 Janvier, 1884.

[2] *Phædrus*, cap. xxix. p. 714.

and fountain-head of the ideal. In the Word, from the beginning — before there was a beginning of time, and the voice of God caused created things to leap forth from nothingness, — throughout the cycles of eternity, — in that perpetual Now which has neither past nor future,[1] — God contemplates those types. By the Word were they made real in the order of created things. For the Word is the conception of the Divine Intelligence.[2] In God, who is most pure activity and absolute actuality, being and conception are one and the same thing. And so, the Father recognizing Himself, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and all other things contained in the Divine Intelligence, conceives the Word. Therefore all knowledge, all wisdom, all created things are in the Word and exist by reason of the Word.[3] Were the eternal type not in the Word, the actual existences fashioned after it would not be. And this is why we say that without the ideal there is no reality. We have at last found the origin and source of the ideal. In all earnestness have we sought it; and, hushed in holy awe before the Godhead, in a loving reverence do

[1] Plato expresses this distinction very clearly: "And the terms *it was* — τό τ'ἦν — and *it will be* — τό τ'ἔσται — are generated forms of time, which we have wrongly and unawares transferred to an eternal Essence." *Timæus*, cap. x.

[2] Dicitur autem propriè Verbum in Deo, secundum quod Verbum significat conceptum intellectus. *Summa St. Thomæ.* Pars I. Quæst. xxxiv. art. 1.

[3] Sic ergo uni soli personæ in divinis convenit dici, eo modo quo dicitur Verbum. . . . Pater enim intelligendo se, et Filium, et Spiritum sanctum, et omnia alia quæ ejus scientiâ continentur, concipit Verbum. *Ibid.* ad 3.

we contemplate its splendor. The Word is not only the source of all created existences; the Word is also the light that enlightens this world. Its glory is reflected, now dimly, now clearly, in every created thing. To the Word did we trace the source whence emanate the principles of our thinking. And as the reason is illuminated with a light above and beyond the sparks that it throws out in its workings, that light giving it all necessary and self-evident truths; as the soul is nurtured and strengthened by that mysterious energy called grace, so the created ideal in each individual mind is enlightened and vivified by the uncreated ideal dwelling in the Word. This illumination of the ideal is the expression of the beautiful.

5. We now know whence it is that a thing of beauty becomes for each of us a joy forever. It is the mission of the artist to rend the veil of accidents and accessories in which the ideal is shrouded and present it to us in all its beauty and loveliness. And the beauty reflected therefrom lights up the folds and inner caverns of our souls, and reveals therein a recognition of this ideal, and reflected from our inmost souls is the image of Him from whom we come, and who is our Home — his image and a pale reflex of the splendor of his glory: on beholding which reflection we are moved; our souls are stirred to their very centre; a yearning takes possession of us, — a longing for the Home whence we came, — a groping after the Invisible Ideal, — and we feel our souls vibrate beneath the touch of the Infinite. God is in us and

we are in God, and the sense of our nearness to Him grows upon us. This is the experience that passes over us in the presence of the ideal. It is the experience that Plato has grandly recorded in his wonderful allegory.[1]

II.

1. We are now in position to understand the importance of an ideal in literary habits of thought. It is essential to them. Literature is the form of art the most varied and complicated. Plato hath well and aptly said of a literary structure: "Every speech ought to be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own, so as neither to be without head, nor without hands, nor without feet; but to have both a beginning, a middle, and an end, described proportionately to one another and to the whole."[2] So to construct a literary masterpiece that part fits to part and each is subordinate to the whole requires a central idea. As the parts in the animal organism are determined by the vital principle animating them, in such manner that all unconsciously develop into fitness and harmony, even so is it with the literary production. When the central thought, the animating principle, the ideal, is clearly grasped, it shapes the form in which it would be expressed. This teaching is clear and simple and as ancient as art. It is the teaching

[1] In the *Phœdrus*, cap. xxxiii.–xxxviii.
[2] *Phœdrus*, cap. xlvii. p. 726.

on which all the masterpieces throughout the ages have been constructed.

2. The artist disentangles the ideal from such accidents and accessories as tend to conceal it, and gives it a new embodiment. Out of the materials that Nature furnishes he fashions for it a body, and breathes into that body the ideal as its living soul, and forthwith the masterpiece stands out a thing of life and beauty and artistic excellence for undying admiration. Defects of detail may enter into its execution, but they are lost, forgotten, absorbed in the general effect produced. It is the "Transfiguration" of Rafael. Who, in presence of that noble scene, would cavil about the posing of limbs or the laws of perspective?[1] It is the "Hamlet" of Shakespeare. Surely, he who overlooks the power, the depth, the philosophy, the dramatic greatness of that tragedy, and quarrels with grammatical structure or obscure expression, has yet to learn the elements of true criticism. Or, it is the "Phædo" of Plato, whose sublime thoughts so frequently recur throughout the sentences here penned. He who should stop at the hard metaphysic or the apparently pointless questions and obscure answers, and should refuse to soar with Socrates in his dying song into the pure regions of truth, proves that he lacks the sympathy and knowledge to appreciate Grecian thought in the days of Plato, and is, therefore, unable to place at its worth one of the sublimest pieces of writing ever penned by

[1] For an instance of such caviling, see Taine's *Italy*, Eng. tr. pp. 142, 143.

human hand.[1] Or, it is the "Divina Commedia." What boots it that Dante's estimates of men and measures are not those of the historian? It detracts naught from the wonderful poem. Men are lost in admiration when they note the care with which word is built upon word, each having a special significance, and all made into a grand allegory wrought out of the politics and the philosophy, the strife and struggle, the fierce hates and the strong loves, in which the author lived and moved and fought. Or, it is Mozart's "Requiem." The critic who would quarrel with that grand composition because in its intricate and complicated structure, speaking of a life's hopes and fears, and the more awful hopes and fears beyond the grave, he misses the sweeter strains of other days would fail to grasp the sublime conception of the piece as a whole. Or, it is the gothic cathedral. Who thinks of making faces at gargoyle or statued niche, where all is emblem and significancy, the stone embodiment of a nation's aspirations? We read in it thought, satire, censure, desire, pathos, passion.[2] In all these instances, behind the mechanical structure, looking out upon us, and peering into our souls, is the ideal.

[1] It is this lack of sympathy that makes the reading of Plato so laborious. Perhaps it is failing to distinguish between the mental habits of the ancient Athenians and those of modern thinkers that has led Mr. Mahaffy, in his admirable *History of Greek Literature* (vol ii. p. 173), to make the criticism noticed above as regards part of the dialogue.

[2] This idea has been grandly drawn out by Victor Hugo, in *Notre Dame de Paris*, liv. iii. chap. 1.

3. This is a doctrine unpopular and distasteful to modern ears. None the less do we here repeat it and insist upon it as a primary factor in all the higher forms of thought and art, and an elementary principle of criticism. It is now claimed that art has no other aim than to construct the form for the form's sake. Now, the art that has only itself for its aim may amuse, may please, may even cause admiration on account of the mechanical skill exhibited; but it is not the art that endures for all time. I shall grant that a Shakespeare or a Goethe may sing as the blackbird sings; but I deny that their art is without purpose, still less without a soul, a vivifying ideal. The ideal, in calling forth our admiration and raising up our thoughts to things higher and beyond the scenes of every-day life, or in purifying the incidents of ordinary duties, is educating our better nature; it is working with a purpose. Ideal and purpose combined determine the form. "To act with a purpose," says Lessing, "is what raises man above the brutes; to invent with a purpose, to imitate with a purpose, is that which distinguishes genius from the petty artists who invent to invent, imitate to imitate."[1] Be it remembered that nothing outside of the Godhead exists for its own sake. The art produced in this spirit is sheer pettiness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of letters. Just as a word has value only inasmuch as it expresses an idea, even so any number of words strung together is meaningless and inane, unless it ex-

[1] Prose works, Bohn ed. *Dramatic Notes*, No. 34, p. 327.

presses a thought, not for the expression's sake, but for that of the thought. The sophists of Plato's day attempted to teach expression for the form's sake. He refuses the very name of art to such expression. "She lies," he tells us in his own scathing words, "and is not an art, but an inartistic trick."[1] Indeed, all art worthy of the name is imbued with the earnestness of life. Consciously or unconsciously, the artist's is a mission to crystallize in his work the spirit of the age; it is also his mission to educate his age, to raise it above itself, and to sustain its aspirations upward and onward —

> "*Artistry being battle with the age*
> *It lives in!* Half life, — silence, while you learn
> What has been done; the other half, — attempt
> At speech, amid world's wail of wonderment —
> 'Here 's something done was never done before!'
> *To be the very breath that moves the age,*
> *Means not to have breath drive you bubble-like*
> *Before it — but yourself to blow: that 's strain;*
> *Strain 's worry through the life-time, till there 's peace;*
> We know where peace expects the artist-soul."[2]

III.

1. No less opposed to the doctrine of the ideal is the School of Realism in literature and art. This school either ignores the ideal or regards it as the product of error. If there is no ideal, or if the ideal is only an illusion, then there is nothing beyond the nature we behold and live in; then the supreme effort of all art is to delineate that nature

[1] καὶ οὐκ ἔστι τέχνη, ἀλλ' ἄτεχνος τριβή. *Phædrus*, cap. xliii.
[2] Robert Browning, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, p. 110.

in detail with the greatest fidelity; then the sole rule of art is, "Copy, describe, imitate, express minutely whatever you see or hear; the more accurately you follow your model the greater artist you are." There is in this doctrine a mixture of truth and error. True it is that art cannot ignore nature. The world we live in is the material upon which art generally works. Therefore the artist observes men and things; he studies the nature outside himself and the nature within himself; he experiments; he compares, judges, discriminates; in this way does he gather up and select the subject-matter upon which he afterwards labors for artistic purposes. But there is in all this more than mere imitation. It is a wholesome realism, and does not exclude the ideal. It is the realism that Millet paints and Ruskin commends. The art that merely imitates can only produce a corpse; it lacks the vital spark, the soul, which is the ideal, and which is necessary in order to create a living organic reality that will quicken genius and arouse enthusiasm throughout the ages. Let us make the distinction; it is a vital one: Art is not imitation; art is interpretation.

2. This distinction the realistic school in art and letters loses sight of. Accordingly, it abandons all attempt at an ideal; it makes no effort to read the lessons of nature; it sees nothing in nature to read beyond the cold, hard lines that it traces; it holds that as the only knowledge is the knowledge arising out of observation and experiment, upon observation and experiment alone must art work. And, as the novel is the most potent literary influence of

the day, the realist would especially make the novel a mere study in nature and character, in which naught is to be set down save what has fallen under the eye or has been experienced in actual life. On the face of it, this theory is sound enough. By all means, let us have observation and experiment. But distinguish between the observation that takes in all the elements of nature and the observation that regards only the material side of nature. The latter alone falls under the scope of the realistic school. It has no other field for development. In consequence, it deals only with man living and acting out his brute nature in all its cunning and sensuality. The writers of this school give us the result of observations indeed, but their observations are of the street and the tavern; of the slum and the dive; of passion through all its phases wallowing in the mire of depravity. They picture human nature; but it is diseased human nature. Believing only in the animal man, naught else remains for the members of this school to depict. Not saintliness of life; for saintliness of life means to them only hypocrisy, or, at most, warped character. Not nobility of thought or word; for the weak, the erring, the monstrous in human nature is the only theme their art recognizes.

3. But this is not the world in which we live and move. This is not the human nature that we are cognizant of. The circle of our acquaintance includes — we know intimately — men and women of a far different stamp; men and women who are true and faithful in their love and friendship;

grand and generous souls, who are self-sacrificing whenever good is to be accomplished or duty to be fulfilled; who think and say the sweetest and sublimest thoughts; whose lives are pure and disinterested; whose intentions and aspirations are elevated and ennobling; who, in the daily round of their beautiful lives, shed about them loveliness and peace and joy and gladness of heart. These are the men and women that surround us. Here is the reality that we know. Here is the reality that even the realist knows. It is only in his library that humanity is to him such a monster. The lowliest life has its sublime passages. It has wherewith to inspire the artist, for it has its ideal. Millet dignifies on the canvas occupations the most menial; Wordsworth reveals the humblest life thrilled by delicate sentiment or by strong passion. Be the subject what it may, genius will ever discover in it an ideal that shall elevate the soul. In this thought we place our consolation and our hope for the future of art and letters. "Realism," said an eloquent French preacher, "is a chronic disease; it is the leprosy of art; it is the epidemic of literature in the nineteenth century."[1] This is the proper diagnosis of the case. Let it be treated as a leprosy or an epidemic. It is at most but a passing phase, a new experience.

4. There are influences hovering over epochs and peoples that give them a characteristic coloring, and place upon them a distinctive impress. Our age is preëminently a transition period. Steam and elec-

[1] Père Felix, *Conférences*, 1867, Conf. v. p. 251.

tricity have added wings to thought and action. Theories appear and disappear in rapid succession to be followed by others as transient. New discoveries, new industries, and new sciences are hastily calling for new terms, new habits of thought, and new methods of work. And yet, much of our thinking runs in old grooves. We are groping in mist and darkness, with new and complex problems pressing upon us harder and faster than we can solve them. Each decade brings its riddle. The conjectures of one decade become the conclusions of the next, and are made the elementary truths of the third. Hence it is that so many of the books of the day are mere fleeting records of impressions as fleeting. Hence the mental entanglements and inconsistencies that beset men's thoughts and actions, their reasonings and their sentiments, their formal expressions and their inner convictions. The clearly demonstrated truth in science and the distinctly expressed ideal in art and letters alone remain permanent in the midst of these ever shifting scenes.

5. In the mean time, it is the life-work of each of us, amid the changes in which he lives, to harmonize, in his own person, all the elements that go to make up that personality. Socrates, on that memorable day when he drank the hemlock cup, told the faithful followers who were gathered around him how at different times a dream visited him in diverse forms, exhorting him to apply himself to the cultivation of music.[1] By music Socrates meant not

[1] *Phædo*, cap. iv. ed. Hirschigii, t. i. p. 46.

simply that combination of sounds that catches up a few fragments of this world's harmonies, and with them moves our souls. There is another and a higher music. It is the music of a soul in which dwell order and method; which coördinates all knowledge; which recognizes the ideal; in which the good, the true, and the beautiful are cultivated, each according to its own nature, and by its own method. It is the rhythm of a thoroughly disciplined intellect and a well-regulated life. That dream comes to us all. If we would realize that harmonious development to its full extent we should cultivate both the Spiritual Sense and the Moral Sense with care and assiduity.