

A GOSSIP ON EMERSON'S TREATMENT OF BEAUTY

BY CLARENCE GOHDES

I SAYE that beawtie commeth of God, and is like a circle, the goodnesse wherof is the Centre. And therefore, as there can be no circle without a centre, no more can beawtie be without goodnesse" (Hoby's Translation of *The Courtier* of Castiglione).

Any attempt to determine the canons of esthetics underlying Emerson's "expositions in poetry" is bound to result in failure because of his unmitigated eclecticism, as well as his mystical attitude toward the "things of the spirit." So many inconsistencies are in evidence in all his writings that in basing conclusions upon them one is apt to stumble into a quagmire, or, at least, to cross over in a gingerly fashion on the stepping-stone of a cautious 'perhaps'. In his essay on Thoreau, Lowell aptly remarks that the artistic range of Emerson is "narrow." This, however true, does not signify that his love of beauty was bounded by the limits of a narrow imagination, or even of a moderately developed artistic sensibility. To accuse him of being a mere dilettante, masking an uncultivated taste beneath a spurious interest in art is to fail utterly in an appreciation of his character. Few men have ever had a greater capacity for appreciation than he. The frequent occurrence of the term *beauty* and its significant bearing upon all that went to make up character and morality for him are sufficient indication of the important place that beauty held in his thoughts, as recorded in his journals.

Emerson's use of the term beauty indicates not only that, for him, at least, beauty has a place in the field of ethics as well as esthetics, but that it has various significations even within that latter field.

"Strange," he writes, "that what I have not is always more excellent than what I have, and that Beauty, no, not Beauty, but a beauty instantly deserts possession, and flies to an object in the horizon" (*Journals*, Vol. VI, p. 202). The word with the capital letter, no doubt, meant to his mind that spiritual exaltation which he chose to identify with truth and goodness—the refinement of Platonic idealism that filled the imagination, and at times passed through the pens of such delicate emotionalists as Shelley and Spenser. I wonder if the Sage of Concord would have been able to recognize his chaste love of abstract beauty in that which revealed itself to Rossetti in the eyes of one of the mystical hourris immortalized in his sonnets. Intrinsically, the beauty that Emerson sought to find in an autumn sunset or a wooded hill is the same as that which Rossetti glimpsed in the perfection of a woman's throat or the spontaneous gesture of her arm. The word in the passage quoted, written with a small letter, on the other hand, meant a mere phase of this all-embracing Beauty, a specialized manifestation of a lower order, and, as such, akin to "a nature passed through the alembic of man"—namely, Art. It is in regard to this latter that Lowell's remark applies.

Setting aside his understanding and appreciation of literature, Emerson's journals reveal the fact that their author was little interested in the various types of creative artistic genius. Music, for example, appears to have meant surprisingly little to him. Despite the fact that he glorified the eye as the most perfect member, he shows very little appreciation for plastic art. One has merely to read the accounts of his impressions gained abroad to see that his genius did not admit of a full, or even proper, interest in the host of glories shut up in the galleries of Europe. Two reasons for this appear to suggest themselves: first, his eye was of that inner kind, "which is the bliss of solitude"; and second, his New England background was rather barren, if not altogether bleak, so far as any cultivation of the fine arts, other than letters, is concerned. There is something wistful, if not whimsically pathetic, in Emerson's comparison of the tasteless churches of Massachusetts with the

hoary cathedrals of France and Italy, crystallizing in their ponderous towers and stained windows the artistic aspirations of ages.

Much has been made of Emerson's lack of knowledge and true appreciation of plastic art—in fact, too much. When aroused, his broad sympathies and profound insight into essentials enabled him to do the fullest justice even to painting. "The head of Washington," he writes in the eighth volume of his Journals (p. 300), "hangs in my dining room for a few days past, and I cannot keep my eyes off of it. It has a certain Appalachian strength, as if it were truly the first-fruits of America, and expressed the country. The heavy, leaden eyes turn on you, as the eyes of an ox in a pasture. And the mouth has a gravity and depth of quiet, as if this man had absorbed all the serenity of America, and left none for his restless, rickety, hysterical countrymen. Noble, aristocratic head, with all kinds of elevation in it, that come out by turns. Such majestic ironies, as he hears the day's politics at table. We imagine him hearing the letter of General Cass, the letter of General Scott, the letter of Mr. Pierce, the effronteries of Mr. Webster recited. This man listens like a god to these low conspirators." Could Gilbert Stuart say that he ever put more into a picture of his famous subject than Emerson got out of this one? How well does this passage illustrate his critical principle, "Art requires a living soul" (Vol. VII, p. 33); or, as he elsewhere expressed the idea, "—there is that in beauty which cannot be caressed, but which requires the utmost wealth of nature in the beholder properly to meet it" (Vol. VI, p. 446). That "wealth of nature," so necessary to the best criticism, was surely his to an eminent degree. His acquaintance with Ruskin's works was close enough to admit of no doubt as to his appreciation of the problem of plastic art in elevating natural beauty to its place above the conventional. Again, he refers to plastic art in these words, "I adhere to Van Waagen's belief, that there is a pleasure from works of art which nothing else can yield" (Vol. VIII, p. 253).

How, then, can one reconcile with this seeming understanding and appreciation such an eloquent tirade as the following: "Art is

cant and pedantry. . . A grand soul flings your gallery into cold nonsense, and no limits can be assigned to its prevalency and to its power to adorn" (Vol. V, p. 488)? The answer is that this mystic-moralist is not only juggling with words as mere inept symbols for ultimate verities, but that he desires to indicate the subordinate place of traditional, finite conceptions of beauty, in view of that cosmical exaltation of the 'Rèason,' unbounded by time and space, and experienced to the full only in rare moments of ecstatic union with the oversoul. This is the beauty that "cannot be clutched," that identifies itself with goodness and truth, that requires a finely developed spiritual apprehension upon the part of the beholder. "Imagination transfigures, so that only the cosmical relations of the object are seen. The persons who rise to beauty must have this transcendency" (Vol. IX, p. 279). Accordingly, the "great soul," the transcendentalist, alone can be the true judge and critic of this higher beauty, this phase of the all-pervading spirit. That clever half-truth, "Art requires a living soul," is, accordingly, the essence of the Emersonian esthetics, if one dare apply the term to such emotional egotism. Glorified individual appreciation—denial of the reality of objective beauty—is to be the criterion of true beauty. This is the mystical aspect of Emerson's love of the beautiful. Fortunately, Emerson possessed a poet's appreciation of concrete manifestations of this spiritual force. The manly, experiential side of his nature saved him from being carried too far away by the Pegasus of refined idealism.

It remains now to attempt a consideration of the reasons underlying a poet's repudiation of art. It is not enough to say that his moral penchant made the secular nature of most artistic creations incompatible with his own. Those pages, already referred to, which record his experiences upon his first trip to Europe, indicate his lack of full appreciation for the purely sensuous, as does also his fierce assertion that "there is no greater lie than a voluptuous book like Boccaccio" (Vol. III, p. 456). It is quite true that his staunch New England ancestry with its rigorous adherence to a Puritan sense of decorum narrowed his scope of appreciation:

yet one must seek further for a more fundamental reason—in the man's own character, not in his surroundings. Traditional religion he threw overboard with a gusto: yet he chose to exalt the beauty of moral perfection above art, although he was a literary artist first and last. Why did this champion of individual submission to mood and whim not allow the fine frenzy of creative genius to sweep him along with its current?

The answer is to be found in his many attempts to describe ineffable moments when a wood, or skyline, or bird-note ushered in a torrential flood of mystical beauty so powerful in its grip upon the imagination that time and space rolled back like a scroll and, despite the passivity of sense perception, a belief—no, a knowledge, of an all-pervasive unity thrilled the spirit of the man. Why seek through art to obtain indirectly a mere aspect of beauty, when the glories of nature offer a means of direct contact with it in its entirety? The answer is simplicity itself. How can we live art when "we can love nothing but nature"? Since art is a mere imitation of nature, those who pursue it as a motivating force in life are but choosing a reflection of a reality for a reality. A beauty becomes Beauty when it detaches itself from the object and, freed from all mundane trammels, exhibits itself as a mere aspect of the cosmic entity—the spirit. As a creator of beauty—as an artist—Emerson knew the beauty of expression with all its implications, at least so far as literary art is concerned; however, he chose to subordinate at times the poet's function of creation to the mystic's function of passive acceptance of the beauty of the "Spirit." And beneath his interests in the creation and reception of beauty, one must remember, there was an insistent conscience that tried to bend all the thoughts and activities of his life in the direction of "the moral sentiment."

Although Emerson did not see fit to "make rules out of beauty," he would, in all probability, have endorsed Woodberry's principle of art for life's sake. Possibly he would have preferred to word it, "Art for character's sake." "But," he insists, "there will always be a class of imaginative men, whom poetry, whom the love of Beauty

leads to the adoration of the moral sentiment" (Vol. X, p. 9). There is something eminently worthy in this belief that "culture is for the results" (Vol. VIII, p. 539), a belief that immediately turns art from the small shrine of an esoteric cult to the broad, green Druid temples of humanity. Carp as one may at his inconsistency and his emotional egotism, the fact remains that he made a most noble attempt to make the love of beauty a source of comfort and discipline to all men. His incapacity for making a proper, objective estimate of human potentialities makes the essential nobility of his purpose no less striking. It is unfortunate that Emerson flattered mankind with the belief that his own mind and heart were typical of the lot.

For Leaders —

The **JOURNAL OF RELIGION**

To read *The Journal of Religion* is to keep in the vanguard of those who are thinking about the problems of present day religious life.

This non-sectarian periodical provides for its readers an unprejudiced, critical account of modern religious thought. It attempts to reveal the inner reality of religion, rather than to defend a doctrinal system. It consistently avoids cant, dogma, technical abstruseness; and constantly emphasizes the interrelationship of religious life and social environment.

This scholarly journal is indispensable to the serious reader interested in religion as a living, spiritual reality in society, in history, and in individual experience.

The Journal of Religion is edited by Shirley Jackson Case with the cooperation of the Divinity Faculty and Conference of the University of Chicago. It is published quarterly at the subscription price of \$3.00 a year.

If you wish to examine *The Journal of Religion* a sample copy will be mailed you free upon request.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
5750 ELLIS AVE. . . . CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

THE LOGIC OF DISCOVERY

By

ROBERT D. CARMICHAEL

Head of the Department of Mathematics
University of Illinois

The main aspects of the process of discovery are skillfully discussed in a manner to interest the non-technical reader.

Three of the chapters have previously been published in *The Monist*, *Scientia* and *The Scientific Monthly*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

- I The Logic of Discovery
- II What is the Place of Postulate Systems in the Further Progress of Thought?
- III On the Nature of Systems of Postulates
- IV Concerning the Postulational Treatment of Empirical Truth
- V The Structure of Exact Thought
- VI The Notion of Doctrinal Function
- VII Hypothesis Growing into Veritable Principle
- VIII What is Reasoning?
- IX The Larger Human Worth of Mathematics
- Index

Pp. 280, cloth. Price \$2.00

By the same Author

A DEBATE ON THE THEORY OF RELATIVITY with an introduction by William Lowe Bryan, Indiana University.

Favoring the Theory: Robert D. Carmichael, University of Illinois, and Harold T. Davis, Indiana University.

Opposing the Theory: William D. MacMillan, University of Chicago and Mason E. Hufford, Indiana University.

(First Impression in 1925, Second Impression in 1927.)

Cloth, \$2.00

THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING COMPANY

Chicago

London