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INTRODUCTION

THE most careless reader of these Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds will be struck by their frequent slighting and depreciatory allusions to the great Venetian colourists, and by the almost passionate note of warning sounded in them against the teaching and influence of these masters. The school of Venice is always referred to by Sir Joshua as the "decorative" school; "mere elegance" is defined as its principal object, and its "ornamental" character is affirmed to be totally inconsistent with any achievement of the first order. Tintoret and Veronese are selected for especial condemnation. "These are the persons who may be said to have exhausted all the powers of florid eloquence to debauch the young and inexperienced." They have turned many painters "from those higher excellences of which the art is capable, and which ought to be required in every considerable production."

It we seek more particularly the ground of Sir Joshua's dislike of the Venetians, we shall find it in the fact that that school was, as he says himself, "engrossed by the study of colour to the neglect of the ideal beauty of form." Ideal beauty of form constituted, in Sir Joshua's view, the only possible really noble motive in art. He never for a moment, in criticism and theory, admitted the possibility of colour constituting such a motive. Colour, in his judgment, remained always a quite secondary and merely decorative affair, while the true greatness of the painting depended entirely on its excellence as a study of form. In one of his letters to the *Idler* he pushes this view to such a length, and so entirely confines the idea of beauty to form, and form alone, that he actually asserts that the colour of a thing can have no more to do with its beauty than its smell has.

If it were an ordinary critic who wrote and reasoned thus, we should pass by his judgments as indicative merely of a totally defective colour sense. But to suppose that Reynolds, of all men, was defective in this respect would be absurd. The extraordinary thing about him is that no sooner had he passed from the lecture-room to his own studio than he proceeded to demonstrate in his work his own intense appreciation of that insidious school of colour against which he was never tired of warning his hearers. He was himself one of those victims whom Tintoret and Veronese had "debauched." He had stayed in Venice but a few weeks, in Rome two years, and yet the example of the Venetians had made incalculably the deeper impression upon him. With all the force of his judgment and reason he approved the teaching of Michael Angelo, but with a warmth which had more of emotion in it he adored the great colourists. Into the examination of the methods by which these had obtained their effects he threw himself with an energy which amounted to downright excitement, and to his thirst for information sacrificed even the paintings that so allured him, rubbing and scraping away, as we are told, the impasto of several valuable pictures in order that he might investigate the composition of the successive layers of colour. His own ceaseless experiments in colour effects and the use into which he was led of refractory pigments, resulting too often in the cracking or peeling of his pictures, are a further testimony to the hold which, entirely against his will, Venice exerted over him. He recognised it himself even while he submitted to it. In the last words addressed by him to the Academicians there is a pathetic consciousness of what he seems to have felt as his own disloyalty in not sticking in practice to that greatness which his reason always assured him was pre-eminent. He could claim to be an admirer only, not a follower, of Michael Angelo. "I have taken another course, one more suited to my abilities and to the taste of the times in which I live. Yet," he exclaims contritely, "however unequal I feel myself to that attempt, were I now to begin the world again I would tread in the steps of that great master; to kiss the

hem of his garment, to catch the slightest of his perfections, would be glory and distinction enough for an ambitious man."

In practice devoted to Venice, in theory despising her; in practice ignoring the great Florentines, in theory strenuously upholding their ideals: such are the contradictions one meets with in Sir Joshua Reynolds, and certainly his judgments, and these lectures in which they are contained, will never be rightly understood until a clue to these contradictions be found.

Let us remember, in the first place, that down to the eighteenth century the native art of England had been essentially an art of form. The great Gothic creative epoch had exhibited its energy and power in architecture and sculpture alone. No great school of painting arose in the North to vie with the varied and rich productions of the builders and sculptors of that age. Such colour as was used was used in a subordinate or, to use Sir Joshua's word, a "decorative" sense—to enrich, that is, and add a brilliance to form. But it was in form only, whether structural, as in the great cathedrals, or statuesque, as in the innumerable and beautiful figures and effigies which adorn or repose in them, or expressed in the carved likeness of flowers and foliage and animals and birds—it was in form, I say, only that the Gothic genius displayed its real power and initiative.

And this being so, the nature of the contributions which the Gothic nations were to make to pictorial art might almost, perhaps, have been foreseen. Drawing rather than painting gave them the effects they sought, and the art of wood engraving became in their hands a natural and popular mode of expression. The powerful black line of the graver was found to be extraordinarily effective in delineating mere form, and accordingly in this new art, first started in Europe about the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Gothic races, however hopelessly behind in delineation by colour, took the lead. They treated it, indeed, quite frankly, not as a pictorial but as a sculptural representation. That is to say, they ignored aerial perspective and effects of light and shade altogether, and made no

attempt to produce the illusion to the eye of a represented scene or landscape. On the other hand, each figure, or object, or animal was outlined with extraordinary clearness and force, as if it were being designed for a carving in relief. One has but to turn from the sculptured work in wood or stone to the wood engravings of the same period to recognise the similarity in spirit between the two, and realise how thoroughly genuine a product of its age the art of engraving was. It carried on the Gothic temper and characteristic view of nature and life. It loved the same direct and literal statements, and its sole pre-occupation was how to express them with as much matter-of-fact precision as possible and invest them with all the air of positive realities. Moreover, the art, as it was developed in the North, betrays the same strong popular sympathies that run through all Gothic art. The same perception belongs to it of the significance and interest of all homely objects and scenes, and it loves to depict in the same way the details of the life and labour of the common people. And if it cannot give to these things the actual reality of concrete form, it still endeavours to attain this end so far as can possibly be done by outline. Its instinct is always to treat its subjects as things, never as appearances.

Wood engraving, then, carries on directly the great Gothic movement, and is part of that movement. It continues to apply to life that measure of *form* which had hitherto so completely satisfied the Northern nations, but which was soon to satisfy them no longer. Moreover, although this splendid Gothic outburst of formative and structural art by degrees waned and spent itself, yet still it remained the only aspect of art of which the North had cognisance. The influence of the Renaissance was for long accepted in the North as a structural influence only. In England painting remained a dead letter, and on the Continent the only notable school which arose, the Dutch school, was remarkable for just the characteristics which had always distinguished Northern art—a love of the facts of common life and a close, exact, and literal representation of form. In short, if we were to take our stand

in the middle of the eighteenth century we should find stretching behind us the long history of an art which had developed with unexampled vigour all the resources of form, but which had never been really warmed and suffused by any great conception of the value of colour. This was the atmosphere and world of art into which Sir Joshua was born, and of which his criticism is the outcome.

I will ask the reader now, in this brief survey of ours of the currents that are carrying us on to the moment of Reynolds's life and influence, to turn his eyes southward to Italy, where he will perceive an altogether new element in art gathering head and preparing to exert an influence contrary to the old influence of form over the rest of Europe.

I have always thought myself that, as the intellectual and matter-of-fact qualities of the Western mind are especially embodied in form, so the emotional and sensuous qualities of the Eastern mind are embodied, or find expression, in colour. However that may be, it would seem to be certain that a conception of the possibilities of colour quite unknown in Europe previously was gradually introduced into Italy during the centuries which ensued between the collapse of classic Rome and the rise of the Gothic nationalities by Byzantine artists and architects arriving from Constantinople and the Eastern empires. This new use of colour, contributed by the East, and which was to take deepest root wherever the influence of the East had been most firmly established, is, moreover, quite easy to understand and define. Gothic colour was used, as I have said, subordinately to form and as one of form's attributes, its range and limits being exactly defined by the body of those objects it belongs to. Oriental colour, on the other hand, is used quite differently. Instead of being handled by form, it is handled by light and shade, and with the help of light and shade it is at once enabled to overcome the limitations of form and to develop a rich and ample scheme of its own extending through the whole composition. The marks of colour used in this sense are, I believe, invariably these two: (1) It always employs its warmest and richest hues; (2) it always melts away the edges and

exactitudes of form, and suffuses them all in a universal sunny glow.

It was in the interiors of their mosaic churches, swathed in mellow gold, inlaid with rich colours, and always deeply and darkly shadowed, that the Byzantine architects best embodied this Oriental conception of colour effect, and the whole of Italy was to some extent warmed by their glow. But it was in Venice, where the influence of the East was always paramount, and where the most splendid of all these mosaic churches glowed and glittered in the midst of the city, that the example had strongest and most definite effect. Here it grafted itself and bore fruit, and in the city which for so many centuries had sucked nourishment from Eastern sources there arose in due time a school of painting in which all the great characteristics of Oriental colour are exhibited.

This school it was which took Reynolds captive. But in yielding to colour of this kind he was not yielding to decorative colour. The rich, suffused colour on the canvas of a Tintoret or a Titian is not decorative colour at all. It is emotional colour, colour used to instil a sensation and a feeling, not to define an object. Will the reader compare in his mind the inside of St. Mark's at Venice with the inside of St. Peter's at Rome? Both make much use of colour, but in St. Mark's the colour appears as a pervading deep and rich glow, governed and controlled by light and shade; in St. Peter's it appears as a complicated pattern of variously cut marbles exposed in clear daylight. This last is the decorative use of colour, and excites no feeling at all. The former is the emotional use of it, and both excites and satisfies deep feeling. The same difference is apparent between colour as dealt with by the Venetian painters and colour as dealt with by the Northern nations before Venice's influence had been felt.

Bearing these facts in mind, the theory and the practice of Reynolds both gain in significance. He came at the moment when the spread of that Eastern ideal of colouring, which had already been carried here and there through Europe, had become possible in England. He has himself drawn attention to this

tendency it possessed to overflow and extend into other nations. "By them," he says—that is, by Tintoret and Veronese especially—"a style merely ornamental has been disseminated throughout all Europe. Rubens carried it into Flanders, Voet to France, and Lucca Giordano to Spain and Naples." To which he might have added, "and I myself to England."

From the point of view of his work and example, Reynolds is to be considered as the instrument of destiny appointed to a great end, while at the same time his own slighting and inadequate criticism of this kind of colour and his humble contrition for having been led astray by it are not, if we remember his date, unintelligible. For, having behind him a national past throughout which form, and the intellectual associations suggested by form, ruled paramount, and in which the only recognised function of colour had been its decorative function, it must seem to be inevitable that, however natural an aptitude he may have possessed for judging the grandeur of form, he could have possessed little for appraising the effects of colour. The truth is that he applies to colour used as the Venetians used it exactly the kind of criticism which he might have applied to it as it was used all through the Gothic epoch. It was inbred in Reynolds that colour must be and could be only a property of form—must and could be, that is to say, only decorative. To this formula he returns again and again, and however inapplicable it may seem to the mighty Venetian canvases, we have only to put ourselves in Reynolds's time and place to perceive that the use of it was natural and inevitable.

But all this represented, after all, only his conscious criticism and reasoning. Form is intellectual, colour emotional, and if intellectually Sir Joshua remained true to the first, emotionally he abandoned himself entirely to the last. Venice never conquered his reason, but she conquered his instincts and feelings and affections, and, for all that reason could do, for thirty years, from his return from Italy until his death, he poured forth work which owes all its power and charm to that very glow and suffusion of colour which year by year he denounced to the pupils of the Royal Academy as a

delusion and a snare. It seems to me that this conquest of Sir Joshua Reynolds, in spite of all his protests and in defiance of all his reasoning, is about the most remarkable proof extant of the irresistible influence which emotional colouring can exert.

Well, then, turning to these Discourses, let us say at once that all the strictures on the great colourists which they contain do not constitute a real valuation of colour at all, but only a valuation of it by one bred in traditions of form. They have, indeed, their own great interest. They enable us to realise, more vividly than anything else I can think of, the limitations and one-sidedness of art in England in the days before Reynolds's own painting achievements had helped to lay the basis of a truer standard in criticism than any he himself possessed or could possess. Here their interest is unique. But as criticism we may pass them by. No one, indeed, has refuted them more ably than Sir Joshua himself. His real and genuine estimate of colour is to be found, not in what he said, but in what he did.

On the other hand, perhaps the very solidity and unity of that great Northern tradition which stretched behind him gave a simplicity and power to his analysis of form which it would scarcely in a later day have possessed. Certainly I do not know where else in English art criticism are to be found such clear and weighty definitions of what grandeur of style consists in as occur throughout these Discourses. The principle of the selection of essential traits, or those common to the species, together with the elimination of accidental ones, or those peculiar to the individual, which may be said to underlie his whole theory of the grand style, is indeed that principle on which art itself is founded, and the recognition of which has made the difference in all ages between the cultured and ignorant, between the artist who simplifies and the artist who complicates, between Greek and barbarian. It is little to the point to say that this principle is already familiar to us, and that we have no need of further instruction in it, for it is with this as with other truths that matter, which become dimmed and stale in the world, and lose their meaning and

have to be reaffirmed from time to time by some great teacher with emphasis and power.

It is in their powerful handling of first principles in all that regards form that the value of these lectures lies. It is this also which gives them for the present age their character of an antidote. There are times during which the national life, uncertain and fluctuating in convictions and aims, is incapable of inspiring art with any definite impulse whatsoever. These, for art, are melancholy days—days divested of all tradition and agreement—which it occupies rather in experimenting on its own methods and processes than in producing definite constructive work. Such experiments, however, are taken very seriously by contemporaries, and all kinds of ingenious, far-fetched tricks are played in paint or marble with as much zeal as if they formed part of a genuine creative movement. Art criticism, it is needless to say, follows the lead of art, and analyses these fugitive individual experiments as solemnly as if they were an authentic expression of the life of their age. The combined effect of this kind of art and this kind of art criticism on a disinterested stranger would probably be that, far from conceiving of art as a very important and vitally human affair, he would conclude that it was an extremely clever and ingenious kind of juggling, which, however interesting to cliques and coteries, could be no concern of mankind in general.

There is no doubt that the best way, or only way, of counteracting this tendency to triviality, to which in an experimental age we are liable, is now and then to have recourse to those primitive and fixed principles of art which are the same in all ages, and obedience to which alone constitutes a passport to the regard of all ages. Only, in order that such principles may be made acceptable and attractive, it is essential that they should be treated with that directness and simplicity which an intimate consciousness of their truth inspires. They are so treated in these Discourses, and the consequence of their being so treated is that just as a reader wearied by the trivialities of contemporary poetry or the arguments of contemporary theology may find rest and refreshment by turning over a page

or two of Wordsworth or Thomas à Kempis, so in something the same way at least, though perhaps in a less degree, he may be brought closer again to the reality he had lost touch of in matters of art by turning from the art criticism of the newspapers to the lectures of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Discourses delivered in the Royal Academy, 1769-1791 (published separately).

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PREFACE TO DISCOURSE I.

TO THE MEMBERS

OF

THE ROYAL ACADEMY

GENTLEMEN,

THAT you have ordered the publication of this discourse is not only very flattering to me, as it implies your approbation of the method of study which I have recommended; but, likewise, as this method receives from that act such an additional weight and authority, as demands from the students that deference and respect which can be due only to the united sense of so considerable a body of artists.

I am,

With the greatest esteem and respect,

Gentlemen,

Your most humble

and obedient Servant,

JOSHUA REYNOLDS.