

# OF THE CAUSE OF THE PLEASURE WE DERIVE FROM TRAGIC OBJECTS.

Whatever pains some modern aesthetics give themselves to establish, contrary to general belief, that the arts of imagination and of feeling have not pleasure for their object, and to defend them against this degrading accusation, this belief will not cease: it reposes upon a solid foundation, and the fine arts would renounce with a bad grace the beneficent mission which has in all times been assigned to them, to accept the new employment to which it is generously proposed to raise them. Without troubling themselves whether they lower themselves in proposing our pleasure as object, they become rather proud of the advantages of reaching immediately an aim never attained except mediately in other routes followed by the activity of the human mind. That the aim of nature, with relation to man, is the happiness of man,--although he ought of himself, in his moral conduct, to take no notice of this aim,-- is what, I think, cannot be doubted in general by any one who admits that nature has an aim. Thus the fine arts have the same aim as nature, or rather as the Author of nature, namely, to spread pleasure and render people happy. It procures for us in play what at other more austere sources of good to man we extract only with difficulty. It lavishes as a pure gift that which elsewhere is the price of many hard efforts. With what labor, what application, do we not pay for the pleasures of the understanding; with what painful sacrifices the approbation of reason; with what hard privations the joys of sense! And if we abuse these pleasures, with what a succession of evils do we expiate excess! Art alone supplies an enjoyment which requires no appreciable effort, which costs no sacrifice, and which we need not repay with repentance. But who could class the merit of charming in this manner with the poor merit of amusing? who would venture

to deny the former of these two aims of the fine arts solely because they have a tendency higher than the latter.

The praiseworthy object of pursuing everywhere moral good as the supreme aim, which has already brought forth in art so much mediocrity, has caused also in theory a similar prejudice. To assign to the fine arts a really elevated position, to conciliate for them the favor of the State, the veneration of all men, they are pushed beyond their due domain, and a vocation is imposed upon them contrary to their nature. It is supposed that a great service is awarded to them by substituting for a frivolous aim--that of charming--a moral aim; and their influence upon morality, which is so apparent, necessarily militates against this pretension. It is found illogical that the art which contributes in so great a measure to the development of all that is most elevated in man, should produce but accessorially this effect, and make its chief object an aim so vulgar as we imagine pleasure to be. But this apparent contradiction it would be very easy to conciliate if we had a good theory of pleasure, and a complete system of aesthetic philosophy.

It would result from this theory that a free pleasure, as that which the fine arts procure for us, rests wholly upon moral conditions, and all the moral faculties of man are exercised in it. It would further result that this pleasure is an aim which can never be attained but by moral means, and consequently that art, to tend and perfectly attain to pleasure, as to a real aim, must follow the road of healthy morals. Thus it is perfectly indifferent for the dignity of art whether its aim should be a moral aim, or whether it should reach only through moral means; for in both cases it has always to do with the

morality, and must be rigorously in unison with the sentiment of duty; but for the perfection of art, it is by no means indifferent which of the two should be the aim and which the means. If it is the aim that is moral, art loses all that by which it is powerful,--I mean its freedom, and that which gives it so much influence over us--the charm of pleasure. The play which recreates is changed into serious occupation, and yet it is precisely in recreating us that art can the better complete the great affair--the moral work. It cannot have a salutary influence upon the morals but in exercising its highest aesthetic action, and it can only produce the aesthetic effect in its highest degree in fully exercising its liberty.

It is certain, besides, that all pleasure, the moment it flows from a moral source, renders man morally better, and then the effect in its turn becomes cause. The pleasure we find in what is beautiful, or touching, or sublime, strengthens our moral sentiments, as the pleasure we find in kindness, in love, etc., strengthens these inclinations. And just as contentment of the mind is the sure lot of the morally excellent man, so moral excellence willingly accompanies satisfaction of heart. Thus the moral efficacy of art is, not only because it employs moral means in order to charm us, but also because even the pleasure which it procures us is a means of morality.

There are as many means by which art can attain its aim as there are in general sources from which a free pleasure for the mind can flow. I call a free pleasure that which brings into play the spiritual forces--reason and imagination--and which awakens in us a sentiment by the representation of an idea, in contradistinction to physical or sensuous pleasure, which places our soul under the dependence of the blind forces of nature, and where sensation is immediately awakened in us by a physical cause. Sensual pleasure is the only one excluded from the domain of the fine arts; and the talent of exciting this kind of pleasure could never raise itself to the dignity of an art, except in the case

where the sensual impressions are ordered, reinforced or moderated, after a plan which is the production of art, and which is recognized by representation. But, in this case even, that alone here can merit the name of art which is the object of a free pleasure--I mean good taste in the regulation, which pleases our understanding, and not physical charms themselves, which alone flatter our sensibility.

The general source of all pleasure, even of sensual pleasure, is propriety, the conformity with the aim. Pleasure is sensual when this propriety is manifested by means of some necessary law of nature which has for physical result the sensation of pleasure. Thus the movement of the blood, and of the animal life, when in conformity with the aim of nature, produces in certain organs, or in the entire organism, corporeal pleasure with all its varieties and all its modes. We feel this conformity by the means of agreeable sensation, but we arrive at no representation of it, either clear or confused.

Pleasure is free when we represent to ourselves the conformability, and when the sensation that accompanies this representation is agreeable. Thus all the representations by which we have notice that there is propriety and harmony between the end and the means, are for us the sources of free pleasure, and consequently can be employed to this end by the fine arts. Thus, all the representations can be placed under one of these heads: the good, the true, the perfect, the beautiful, the touching, the sublime. The good especially occupies our reason; the true and perfect, our intelligence; the beautiful interests both the intelligence and the imagination; the touching and the sublime, the reason and the imagination. It is true that we also take pleasure in the charm (Reiz) or the power called out by action from play, but art uses charm only to accompany the higher enjoyments which the idea of propriety gives to us. Considered in itself the charm or attraction is lost

amid the sensations of life, and art disdains it together with all merely sensual pleasures.

We could not establish a classification of the fine arts only upon the difference of the sources from which each of them draws the pleasure which it affords us; for in the same class of the fine arts many sorts of pleasures may enter, and often all together. But in as far as a certain sort of pleasure is pursued as a principal aim, we can make of it, if not a specific character of a class properly so called, at least the principle and the tendency of a class in the works of art. Thus, for example, we could take the arts which, above all, satisfy the intelligence and imagination--consequently those which have as chief object the true, the perfect, and the beautiful--and unite them under the name of fine arts (arts of taste, arts of intelligence); those, on the other hand, which especially occupy the imagination and the reason, and which, in consequence, have for principal object the good, the sublime, and the touching, could be limited in a particular class under the denomination of touching arts (arts of sentiment, arts of the heart). Without doubt it is impossible to separate absolutely the touching from the beautiful, but the beautiful can perfectly subsist without the touching. Thus, although we are not authorized to base upon this difference of principle a rigorous classification of the liberal arts, it can at least serve to determine with more of precision the criterion, and prevent the confusion in which we are inevitably involved, when, drawing up laws of aesthetic things, we confound two absolutely different domains, as that of the touching and that of the beautiful.

The touching and the sublime resemble in this point, that both one and the other produce a pleasure by a feeling at first of displeasure, and that consequently (pleasure proceeding from suitability, and displeasure from the contrary) they give us a feeling of suitability which presupposes an unsuitability.

The feeling of the sublime is composed in part of the feeling of our feebleness, of our impotence to embrace an object; and, on the other side, of the feeling of our moral power--of this superior faculty which fears no obstacle, no limit, and which subdues spiritually that even to which our physical forces give way. The object of the sublime thwarts, then, our physical power; and this contrariety (impropriety) must necessarily excite a displeasure in us. But it is, at the same time, an occasion to recall to our conscience another faculty which is in us--a faculty which is even superior to the objects before which our imagination yields. In consequence, a sublime object, precisely because it thwarts the senses, is suitable with relation to reason, and it gives to us a joy by means of a higher faculty, at the same time that it wounds us in an inferior one.

The touching, in its proper sense, designates this mixed sensation, into which enters at the same time suffering and the pleasure that we find in suffering. Thus we can only feel this kind of emotion in the case of a personal misfortune, only when the grief that we feel is sufficiently tempered to leave some place for that impression of pleasure that would be felt by a compassionate spectator. The loss of a great good prostrates for the time, and the remembrance itself of the grief will make us experience emotion after a year. The feeble man is always the prey of his grief; the hero and the sage, whatever the misfortune that strikes them, never experience more than emotion.

Emotion, like the sentiment of the sublime, is composed of two affections--grief and pleasure. There is, then, at the bottom a propriety, here as well as there, and under this propriety a contradiction. Thus it seems that it is a contradiction in nature that man, who is not born to suffer, is nevertheless a prey to suffering, and this contradiction hurts us. But the evil which this contradiction does us is a propriety with regard to our reasonable nature in general, insomuch as this

evil solicits us to act: it is a propriety also with regard to human society; consequently, even displeasure, which excites in us this contradiction, ought necessarily to make us experience a sentiment of pleasure, because this displeasure is a propriety. To determine in an emotion if it is pleasure or displeasure which triumphs, we must ask ourselves if it is the idea of impropriety or that of propriety which affects us the more deeply. That can depend either on the number of the aims reached or abortive, or on their connection with the final aim of all.

The suffering of the virtuous man moves us more painfully than that of the perverse man, because in the first case there is contradiction not only to the general destiny of man, which is happiness, but also to this other particular principle, viz., that virtue renders happy; whilst in the second case there is contradiction only with regard to the end of man in general. Reciprocally, the happiness of the wicked also offends us much more than the misfortune of the good man, because we find in it a double contradiction: in the first place vice itself, and, in the second place, the recompense of vice.

There is also this other consideration, that virtue is much more able to recompense itself than vice, when it triumphs, is to punish itself; and it is precisely for this that the virtuous man in misfortune would much more remain faithful to the cultus of virtue than the perverse man would dream of converting himself in prosperity.

But what is above all important in determining in the emotions the relation of pleasure and displeasure, is to compare the two ends--that which has been fulfilled and that which has been ignored--and to see which is the most considerable. There is no propriety which touches us so nearly as moral propriety, and no superior pleasure to that which we feel from it. Physical propriety could well be a problem, and a problem forever unsolvable. Moral propriety is already demonstrated. It alone is

founded upon our reasonable nature and upon internal necessity. It is our nearest interest, the most considerable, and, at the same time, the most easily recognized, because it is not determined by any external element but by an internal principle of our reason: it is the palladium of our liberty.

This moral propriety is never more vividly recognized than when it is found in conflict with another propriety, and still keeps the upper hand; then only the moral law awakens in full power, when we find it struggling against all the other forces of nature, and when all those forces lose in its presence their empire over a human soul. By these words, "the other forces of nature," we must understand all that is not moral force, all that is not subject to the supreme legislation of reason: that is to say, feelings, affections, instincts, passions, as well as physical necessity and destiny. The more redoubtable the adversary, the more glorious the victory; resistance alone brings out the strength of the force and renders it visible. It follows that the highest degree of moral consciousness can only exist in strife, and the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain.

Consequently, the kind of poetry which secures us a high degree of moral pleasure, must employ mixed feelings, and please us through pain or distress--this is what tragedy does specially; and her realm embraces all that sacrifices a physical propriety to a moral one; or one moral propriety to a higher one. It might be possible, perhaps, to form a measure of moral pleasure, from the lowest to the highest degree, and to determine by this principle of propriety the degree of pain or pleasure experienced. Different orders of tragedy might be classified on the same principle, so as to form a complete exhaustive tabulation of them. Thus, a tragedy being given, its place could be fixed, and its genus determined. Of this subject more will be said separately in its proper place.

A few examples will show how far moral propriety commands physical propriety in our souls.

Theron and Amanda are both tied to the stake as martyrs, and free to choose life or death by the terrible ordeal of fire--they select the latter. What is it which gives such pleasure to us in this scene? Their position so conflicting with the smiling destiny they reject, the reward of misery given to virtue--all here awakens in us the feeling of impropriety: it ought to fill us with great distress. What is nature, and what are her ends and laws, if all this impropriety shows us moral propriety in its full light. We here see the triumph of the moral law, so sublime an experience for us that we might even hail the calamity which elicits it. For harmony in the world of moral freedom gives us infinitely more pleasure than all the discords in nature give us pain.

When Coriolanus, obedient to duty as husband, son, and citizen, raises the siege of Rome, them almost conquered, withdrawing his army, and silencing his vengeance, he commits a very contradictory act evidently. He loses all the fruit of previous victories, he runs spontaneously to his ruin: yet what moral excellence and grandeur he offers! How noble to prefer any impropriety rather than wound moral sense; to violate natural interests and prudence in order to be in harmony with the higher moral law! Every sacrifice of a life is a contradiction, for life is the condition of all good; but in the light of morality the sacrifice of life is in a high degree proper, because life is not great in itself, but only as a means of accomplishing the moral law. If then the sacrifice of life be the way to do this, life must go. "It is not necessary for me to live, but it is necessary for Rome to be saved from famine," said Pompey, when the Romans embarked for Africa, and his friends begged him to defer his departure till the gale was over.

But the sufferings of a criminal are as charming to us tragically as those of a virtuous man; yet here is the idea of moral impropriety. The

antagonism of his conduct to moral law, and the moral imperfection which such conduct presupposes, ought to fill us with pain. Here there is no satisfaction in the morality of his person, nothing to compensate for his misconduct. Yet both supply a valuable object for art; this phenomenon can easily be made to agree with what has been said.

We find pleasure not only in obedience to morality, but in the punishment given to its infraction. The pain resulting from moral imperfection agrees with its opposite, the satisfaction at conformity with the law. Repentance, even despair, have nobleness morally, and can only exist if an incorruptible sense of justice exists at the bottom of the criminal heart, and if conscience maintains its ground against self-love. Repentance comes by comparing our acts with the moral law, hence in the moment of repenting the moral law speaks loudly in man. Its power must be greater than the gain resulting from the crime as the infraction poisons the enjoyment. Now, a state of mind where duty is sovereign is morally proper, and therefore a source of moral pleasure. What, then, sublimer than the heroic despair that tramples even life underfoot, because it cannot bear the judgment within? A good man sacrificing his life to conform to the moral law, or a criminal taking his own life because of the morality he has violated: in both cases our respect for the moral law is raised to the highest power. If there be any advantage it is in the case of the latter; for the good man may have been encouraged in his sacrifice by an approving conscience, thus detracting from his merit. Repentance and regret at past crimes show us some of the sublimest pictures of morality in active condition. A man who violates morality comes back to the moral law by repentance.

But moral pleasure is sometimes obtained only at the cost of moral pain. Thus one duty may clash with another. Let us suppose Coriolanus encamped with a Roman army before Antium or Corioli, and his mother a Volscian; if her prayers

move him to desist, we now no longer admire him. His obedience to his mother would be at strife with a higher duty, that of a citizen. The governor to whom the alternative is proposed, either of giving up the town or of seeing his son stabbed, decides at once on the latter, his duty as father being beneath that of citizen. At first our heart revolts at this conduct in a father, but we soon pass to admiration that moral instinct, even combined with inclination, could not lead reason astray in the empire where it commands. When Timoleon of Corinth puts to death his beloved but ambitious brother, Timophanes, he does it because his idea of duty to his country bids him to do so. The act here inspires horror and repulsion as against nature and the moral sense, but this feeling is soon succeeded by the highest admiration for his heroic virtue, pronouncing, in a tumultuous conflict of emotions, freely and calmly, with perfect rectitude. If we differ with Timoleon about his duty as a republican, this does not change our view. Nay, in those cases, where our understanding judges differently, we see all the more clearly how high we put moral propriety above all other.

But the judgments of men on this moral phenomenon are exceedingly various, and the reason of it is clear. Moral sense is common to all men, but differs in strength. To most men it suffices that an act be partially conformable with the moral law to make them obey it; and to make them condemn an action it must glaringly violate the law. But to determine the relation of moral duties with the highest principle of morals requires an enlightened intelligence and an emancipated reason. Thus an action which to a few will be a supreme propriety, will seem to the crowd a revolting impropriety, though both judge morally; and hence the emotion felt at such actions is by no means uniform. To the mass the sublimest and highest is only exaggeration, because sublimity is perceived by reason, and all men have not the same share of it. A vulgar soul is oppressed or overstretched by those

sublime ideas, and the crowd sees dreadful disorder where a thinking mind sees the highest order.

This is enough about moral propriety as a principle of tragic emotion, and the pleasure it elicits. It must be added that there are cases where natural propriety also seems to charm our mind even at the cost of morality. Thus we are always pleased by the sequence of machinations of a perverse man, though his means and end are immoral. Such a man deeply interests us, and we tremble lest his plan fail, though we ought to wish it to do so. But this fact does not contradict what has been advanced about moral propriety,--and the pleasure resulting from it.

Propriety, the reference of means to an end, is to us, in all cases, a source of pleasure; even disconnected with morality. We experience this pleasure unmixed, so long as we do not think of any moral end which disallows action before us. Animal instincts give us pleasure--as the industry of bees--without reference to morals; and in like manner human actions are a pleasure to us when we consider in them only the relation of means to ends. But if a moral principle be added to these, and impropriety be discovered, if the idea of moral agent comes in, a deep indignation succeeds our pleasure, which no intellectual propriety can remedy. We must not call to mind too vividly that Richard III., Iago, and Lovelace are men; otherwise our sympathy for them infallibly turns into an opposite feeling. But, as daily experience teaches, we have the power to direct our attention to different sides of things; and pleasure, only possible through this abstraction, invites us to exercise it, and to prolong its exercise.

Yet it is not rare for intelligent perversity to secure our favor by being the means of procuring us the pleasure of moral propriety. The triumph of moral propriety will be great in proportion as the snares set by Lovelace for the virtue of Clarissa are formidable, and as the trials of an innocent victim

by a cruel tyrant are severe. It is a pleasure to see the craft of a seducer foiled by the omnipotence of the moral sense. On the other hand, we reckon as a sort of merit the victory of a malefactor over his moral sense, because it is the proof of a certain strength of mind and intellectual propriety.

Yet this propriety in vice can never be the source of a perfect pleasure, except when it is humiliated by morality. In that case it is an essential part of our pleasure, because it brings moral sense into stronger relief. The last impression left on us by the author of *Clarissa* is a proof of this. The intellectual propriety in the plan of Lovelace is greatly surpassed by the rational propriety of *Clarissa*. This allows us to feel in full the satisfaction caused by both.

When the tragic poet has for object to awaken in us the feeling of moral propriety, and chooses his means skilfully for that end, he is sure to charm doubly the connoisseur, by moral and by natural propriety. The first satisfies the heart, the second the mind. The crowd is impressed through the heart without knowing the cause of the magic impression. But, on the other hand, there is a class of connoisseurs on whom that which affects the heart is entirely lost, and who can only be gained by the appropriateness of the means; a strange contradiction resulting from over-refined taste, especially when moral culture remains behind intellectual. This class of connoisseurs seek only the intellectual side in touching and sublime themes. They appreciate this in the justest manner, but you must beware how you appeal to their heart! The over-culture of the age leads to this shoal, and nothing becomes the cultivated man so much as to escape by a happy victory this twofold and pernicious influence. Of all other European nations, our neighbors, the French, lean most to this extreme, and we, as in all things, strain every nerve to imitate this model.