

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Mid-West Quarterly, The (1913-1918)

Mid-West Quarterly, The (1913-1918)

1914

"Laokoon" and the Prior Question

Hartley Burr Alexander
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/midwestqtrly>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Alexander, Hartley Burr, "'Laokoon" and the Prior Question" (1914). *Mid-West Quarterly, The (1913-1918)*. 8.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/midwestqtrly/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mid-West Quarterly, The (1913-1918) at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-West Quarterly, The (1913-1918) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

“LAOKOON” AND THE PRIOR QUESTION

The first gift of criticism is perspective. By perspective I mean a comprehensive view of related matters shown in their just and intelligible proportion. To attain such views in any department which falls within our human ken is no light task. The matters considered must be seen, as Arnold would have us see life, steadily and whole; and steadiness implies balance in the observer, no less than wholeness depends upon the accessibility of the phenomena. It is a happy union, therefore, of the personality and the season which produces the truly great critic.

The source and fountain of European criticism, Aristotle's *Poetics*, appears just after the greatness of Greek literature had run its course, when Greek epic and drama lay before the observer with all the completeness which was to be preserved to posterity. *Longinus On the Sublime*—if we are to assume the probable date—follows the entire flowering of the pagan classics. Lessing's *Laokoon*, published in 1766, is contemporary with the rococo decadence of the new classicism which came into being with the Renaissance. Each of these treatises is something in the nature of an obituary disquisition, for each is concerned with the portrayal of excellences which, at least in the form that is foremost in the critic's mind, are not to appear in the literary expression of the ensuing age—excellences which are in a bodily sense dead and buried, and if at all subject to resurrection only so in some decidedly novel incarnation. It is partly for this reason, I fancy, that the panegyric temper of Longinus so movingly affects us.

And is it not fairly obvious also that the recency of the development considered, as of a bereavement not yet clearly realised, unconsciously disturbs the critical office? I would not say that in the case of such minds as those of Aristotle and Longinus and Lessing the criticism is warped by its circumstances—that is too strong an expression; but it does not seem unfair to affirm that each of these critics writes with a local and circumstantial bias which modifies the final value of his perspective. Aristotle clearly gives us no standard for judgment of Greek poetry as a whole (which, doubtless, he never intended to give); his interest is centralised in the public, the agonistic, types

of composition—in the dithyramb, in the epic, in tragedy,—and consequently his criticism elevates the dramatic elements in literature and judges merits by dramatic effects: ἦθος rather than φύσις, man rather than nature, becomes for him the proper theme of literary art,—though perhaps we had better say that the poems which went under the title Περὶ Φύσεως, even when they attained to such epical imaginings as appear in the works of Empedocles, seemed to him to involve no proper artistic problem; for with Aristotle as with Plato the problem of art is a problem of ethics, and the poems on nature were to be tried before the metaphysical tribunal of truth rather than subjected to the æsthetic ethical adjudication of καλοκάγαθία.

Longinus clearly has more feeling for nature (in an æsthetic sense) than has Aristotle. But Longinus, no less than Aristotle, has partialities which constitute a bias. For if Aristotle is a spectator, Longinus is a listener: it is the oration which is foremost in his imagination, and he hears all poetry as from the mouth of a declaimer. And in nature what he most admires is a certain cosmic magniloquence, of thunder and flame and of the moving sea, susceptible of imitation in the high speech of mortal men. The world of nature is after all but a setting for the works of man, and if these are now to be celebrated from the rostrum rather than upon the stage the change is but one of the manner, not of the matter of the art.

Said in all fairness, Aristotle and Longinus give us the best measure of ancient criticism; they define for us the classic conception of literature, as essentially human and essentially dramatic. I do not mean to say that no other forms appear in antiquity; I have already cited the poems on nature; and many minor modes, lyric, meditative, passively descriptive, find their due examples. But were we to excerpt from classical literature the elements neglected by Aristotle and Longinus we should have taken away little that is of more than antiquarian interest; the vital body would still remain.

It is worth while to get clearly in mind this essential classicism before turning to Lessing, for the feeling for what is human and dramatic is the very pillar of Lessing's criticism. Viewing ancient literature at a distance, he could see it in truer perspective; and he had besides the advantage of comparison with later literary developments. Further, Lessing had seen the rise of that consciousness of the separateness of art from the run of

human interests which has given us the domain of æsthetics as a distinct domain; so that where the ancients saw only a problem of the good we can see a problem of beauty, and by comparing art with art—a task which they never seriously attempted—we can analyse beauty from diverse situations. We should expect, then, that Lessing, having the equipped mind and having the materials before him, when he undertakes his discussion of the “boundaries of the arts,” would give us a more capable and satisfying depiction of the office of literature than even the greatest of his antique predecessors. We should expect him to be free from the adventitious and circumstantial, in so far as this may be allowed to man; and perhaps the highest tribute that could be paid to Lessing’s value is the fact that a capable editor, a hundred and fifty years after the *Laokoon* first appeared,¹ in giving us an edition “purged of the ephemeral” finds so little of what was printed on the original page to be excluded from the modern.

In Lessing, we may reasonably assume, classicism finds its central expositor. And in undertaking a review of the works of some contemporary critics, whose conflicts largely turn upon their conceptions of “classic” and its assumed antithetical, “romantic,” we may best serve our purpose by a restatement of the main thesis of Lessing’s work,—all the more in point from the fact that a notable modern book by Professor Irving Babbitt challenges the comparison in its title, *The New Laokoon*.

I

It is the genius of the German to generate an atmosphere of profundity about the simplest ideas. Most Teutonic thinkers are men of one idea, but that idea is so patiently dichotomised and so ingeniously elaborated that it ends by becoming a system; for them experience is confounded with logistic and metaphysics identified with *Schematismus*. It is doubtless for this reason that the German philosophers are of all men the easiest to epithet; a word or a phrase will carry the whole burden of their thought, whose formidable outward show is only the gaseous enlargement of its ponderable substance.

Lessing is a German. I do not mean that he lacks matter; but compare him with Aristotle or Longinus and he reads thin;

¹ *Laokoon*. Edited by William Guild Howard.

it is, after all, the garb of learning with which he invests his idea, rather than its own native richness, that makes its impressiveness. I speak of "his idea" in the singular, for he shares the peculiarity of his countrymen, and the *Laokoon* is very obviously a book of one thought. Indeed, he himself reduces it to an epigram: "*Die Zeitfolge ist das Gebiet des Dichters, sowie der Raum das Gebiet des Malers*"—"Temporal succession is the province of the poet, as space is that of the painter." The whole essay is but an elaboration of this conception: time is the "pure form" of poetry, space is the "pure form" of pictorial art.

I cannot strictly call this Kantianism, though the application of Kant's *Transcendental Æsthetic* to the problems of art must have produced exactly this conclusion; for while Lessing had some personal acquaintance with Kant, the *Laokoon* antedates the *Kritik* by some fifteen years, and indeed is contemporary with Kant's first puzzling over inner and outer space. But the analogy is none the less interesting, showing as it does how inevitably the Teuton of the period solved his empirical problems by transcendental reason—so explaining in advance, what any reader of Lessing must feel, that his illustrations are chosen by his thesis, and his thesis not, as would be the temper of our times, framed upon the materials.

But let us turn for a moment to the matter. Lessing is discussing the limits of the arts, and he makes of these psychological limits. The imitations (Lessing accepts the classical definition of art as imitation) of plastic and pictorial art must be apprehensible in a single glance; the powers of the eye, which is the organ by which we perceive objects in space as unitary objects, themselves set the bounds for unity in spatial art; and these bounds are best described as the limits of what can be embraced in a moment of clear seeing. Spatial art is, then, momentary art. The moment is indeed the very soul of the art, and its choice the crux of inspiration. It must not be a transitory, a temporal, an active moment; rather it must be a moment of pause, a suggestive, or, as Lessing calls it, a "fruitful" moment,—one in which physical action has ceased, but, as it were, in a suspense which indefinitely challenges and intensifies imaginative activity. One of Lessing's surest passages characterises this moment:

"That alone is the fruitful moment which gives the imagination free play. The more we see the more must we be able to add in thought, and the more we add in thought just so much more must we feel that we see. In the whole

course of a passion there is no moment which has less of this advantage than has its highest stage. Beyond that there is nothing, and to reveal the utmost to the eye is to bind the wings of phantasy and to necessitate that, since it cannot pass beyond the sensible impression, it should busy itself with weaker images for which the visible fulness of the expression serves as a limitation."

Lessing illustrates this fruitful moment by the Laocoön group. The artists have seized upon the instant before struggle has passed into surrender: Laocoön's lips are open, but the despairing shriek is not yet uttered. And he illustrates again from the art of Timomachus: Ajax is depicted in dejection, contemplating self-destruction in the moment after yielding to his berserk passion, he is not shown in the midst of his rage; Medea is shown before the murder of her children, torn between mother-love and jealousy, the only moment which our sympathies will endure.

But, says Lessing, poetry is not confined to such restricted moments; poetry can legitimately depict the whole suffering of Laocoön, the whole passion of Ajax or Medea. Indeed, poetry must not concentrate upon the single moment if it is to produce its own proper effect. Its business is not to compete with painting, but to imitate that of which the painter's art is incapable; and that is action, moving events, temporal reality. Objects contiguous or with parts contiguous are bodies, the visible peculiarities of which are the theme of plastic and pictorial art; objects sequent or with parts sequent are actions, and these are the peculiar objects of poetic art.

Here we have, in its *a priori* simplicity, Lessing's *Grundbegriff*; and it is not without significance, touching such modes of metaphysic, that the law is no sooner laid down than it is modified. For all objects are both contiguous in space and sequent in time; each moment is an enchainé appearance, the effect of its predecessor, the cause of its successor. Hence painting can in fact represent action, "*aber nur andeutungsweise durch Körper*,"—but only suggestively through objects; while poetry, no less, may depict bodies, "*aber nur andeutungsweise durch Handlungen*,"—but only suggestively through actions. Thus Raphael, in his treatment of draperies, shows the last preceding movement of the limb; Homer, on occasion, uses three and even four pictorial adjectives. The rule of practice is that the two linked moments which the painter is permitted must be so near in time that we see them as one without shock, while the successive images of the

poet must be presented in words so interlinked that we seem to hear them as one.

Alas for metaphysics and the high *a priori* road! The clear-cut boundaries between the arts are no sooner envisaged than they shimmer and fuse and fluctuate away. For the limits which Lessing would impose are not outer, but inner; not in the nature of the matters of art, but in the power of the artist's imagination. If your artist has the compelling imagination of a Michelangelo; we can see without shock, in one graphic presentation, moments of time so far apart as birth and death, Creation and the Day of Judgment, while the scenic power of words is so chief an ornament of literature that we can hardly conceive of great poetic imagination apart from its exercise. Indeed, Lessing erases his own demarcation when he maintains that the poet "will make the ideas, which he arouses in us, so living that we seem to feel the true sensible impression of the objects themselves, and in this moment of illusion cease to be conscious of his words which are but the means that he employs to this end." If the ultimate effect of art is a moment of illusion, the agency by which this illusion is produced should be a matter of indifference.

The truth is that the moment of physical contemplation accompanied by imaginative zeal, which is for Lessing the proper effect of the painter's art, and the moment of vivid imagery accompanied by oblivescence of the words, which is for him the life of poetry, these two moments are one and the same; they are occasioned by diverse agents, but they are like experiences, and it is impossible to determine from the experience what the agent ought to be. In words which cannot be bettered, Herder put the central truth: "If action be the proper subject of poetic art, yet can this subject never be determined through the dry concept of succession; *force* is the midpoint of its sphere. And this force is the force which cleaves to the inwardness of words; it is the magic which, through phantasy and memory, works upon the soul; it is the being of poesy."

If we pause to ask ourselves why, with all its apparent strength, Lessing's argument analyses so weakly, the answer will be found to turn upon two deficiencies.

The first of these is of a material nature. Lessing's outlook upon art is woefully limited. With all his erudition—and no man can speak of it without respect—he seems to have no balanced experience of literature. For him poetry is dramatic

poetry; it is the poetry of action, and that action human action. Here Lessing is at one with the ancients; here lies his classicism. But surely it is a defect for a modern critic to overlook, even if he be not drawn to, that body of lyric and devotional expression which makes so great part of what the world counts its poetic riches. Similarly, on the side of art, Lessing seems to see in the painter only a possible illustrator,—not of poetry, but of ideas; his contention is that poetry cannot be pictorially illustrated, although there are ideas which can be depicted. To a degree this contention is justified, but to make it the foundation of a philosophy of art implies small acquaintance with the aims and themes of the painter. In brief, Lessing takes human forms and human conduct, the scenes and actions which make life, and he shows how in dramatic portrayal spectacle and book supplement one another; what he gives is admirable as a guide to truth in the theatre, but it is a slight survey of the whole field of art.

The second deficiency in Lessing is one of psychology. I know that "psychology" is nowadays a term to conjure with, and that its charge of knowledge is overblown with bosh and bluster; but the charge of knowledge is, after all, genuine; and if the critics insist upon being psychological it is but in nature that the psychologist retort upon them. In the case of Lessing his ignorance is quite pardonable in the man but a heavy burden upon his theories. For in the first place the whole assumption of the momentariness of our visual perceptions of objects, as unities or entirities, is a false assumption; yet he makes it the support of his theory of painting and sculpture. And in the second place the notions upon which he frames his theory of poetry— notions of the laboriousness of visual imagination and of its inability to compose unities competing with those of sense,—these notions must strike with astonishment many of his fellow-men whose experiences are quite the reverse. The truth appears to be that Lessing was what is technically known as a motile, or movement-minded man, one who thinks in terms of action rather than of sense: "In general," he says, "we can remember movements more easily and in a livelier manner than forms or colours,"—a statement which may very likely have been true of himself but is certainly not true of many another. It is obvious that no man can safely erect a theory of art upon his own idiosyncracies, and Lessing himself is never wiser than in saying, "*Nichts ist betrüg-*"

licher als allgemeine Gesetze für unsere Empfindungen”—“Nothing is more deceptive than general rules for our sensibilities.”

II

Professor Irving Babbitt entitles his essay *The New Laokoon* as an indication of his intention, with an added century and a half of literary history in perspective, once again to take up the discussion of the boundaries of the arts. The essay divides into two parts: in the first of these, entitled “The Pseudo-Classic Confusion of the Arts,” he analyses the conditions and theories which led up to Lessing’s criticism, whose value and shortcomings he appraises; in the second part, entitled “The Romantic Confusion of the Arts,” he resumes the developments of the nineteenth century and attacks the errors into which he deems our time to have fallen.

The argument of the first part is to the effect that the “classicism” of post-Renaissance times is essentially a false classicism. It confuses the arts externally and formally,—a confusion due, in large part, to its mistaken understanding of the Greek conception of “imitation” as the first definition of art: this doctrine of imitation was regarded as throwing the whole stress of æsthetic creation upon the element of reproduction, either a formal copying of classic models or a no less formal symbolism of *la belle nature*; that is, of nature regarded as a gracious theme for the display of artistic tact and taste. The result is obvious and calculated fiction rather than true imaginative illusion—a chimaera-like consumption of “second intentions” rather than a vital interpretation of the idea in nature. It was this formalism, based on an external and mechanical conception of imitation, which begot the pictorial poetry and poeticised painting attacked by Lessing. Lessing “is as willing as any critic of the Renaissance to grant that poetry is a painting and an imitation,” but “he is not willing to take the next step, and establish a formal resemblance between words and figures of speech in poetry and colours in painting.” Lessing has done little more, adds Professor Babbitt, than develop the aphorism of La Fontaine: “Words and colours are not alike, nor are eyes ears”; his discussion is really confined to the realm of sense-organ and stimulus, the realm of experience remains unanalysed.

And it is precisely in the realm of experience, in an inward

and psychical sense, that Romanticism creates its confusions. In place of neo-classic "imitation," it exalts "spontaneity"; in place of a mind which is a blank tablet for outer impressions, it offers a soul immured in its "tower of ivory"; in place of a chimæra feeding on "second intentions," it gives us a monstrous inner assimilation of "first intentions." "Back to Nature" is its cry, but the nature to which it would return is unconfined and lawless, animistic rather than humanistic, with "higher" and "lower" inextricably interfused. It is a sort of post-Kantian "absorption" and "transmutation" in which things and ideas, appearances and realities, disappear in an absolute blend, which merits its name of "absolute" only because it is indescribable. Word-painting, programme music, works in which sounds are meant to be seen and colours to be heard, all these are symptomatic confusions: "as a man thus melts into nature," says Mr. Babbitt, "his vocabulary melts into nature with him and takes on all its variegated hues."

This extraordinary development our critic finds to be but the outward expression of a psychic mutation which has altered our faculties. He says:

"The inward eye of which Wordsworth speaks was comparatively dormant in men before the last century; since then it has been so developed as to become a sort of new sense that brings the objects of outer nature into contact with the soul through the medium of imaginative illusion, refining them in the process and attuning them to human emotion. This new sense is in itself delightful and legitimate, and the reverie with which it is associated has its own uses. The romantic error has been to make of this reverie the serious substance of life instead of its occasional solace; to set up the things that are below the reason as a substitute for those that are above; in short, to turn the nature cult into a religion."

In a further passage the diagnosis is expanded:

"If all the arts are thus restless and impressionistic, the reason is not far to seek: it is because the people who practise these arts and for whom they are practised are themselves living in an impressionistic flutter. If the arts lack dignity, centrality, repose, it is because the men of the present have no centre, no sense of anything fixed or permanent either within or without themselves, that they may oppose to the flux of phenomena and the torrent of impressions. In a word, if confusion has crept into the arts, it is merely a special aspect of a more general malady, of that excess of sentimental and scientific naturalism from which, if my diagnosis is correct, the occidental world is now suffering."

It is obvious from these passages that the author of *The New Laokoon* is, like his predecessor, a classicist in the sense that his feeling for art is merged in his feeling for human conduct: that moral and æsthetic problems are identical. In the concluding chapters of the book this classicism comes to explicit expression. Neo-Classicism and Romanticism, he argues, stands each for a half-truth: the need of form and the need of matter. But in divorcing these complementary needs, each movement has fallen into error: formalism, the result of an indolence of the imagination, is the error of the false classicists; "eleutheromania"—"an undefined liberty and an unselective sympathy,"—the result of an indolence of the reason, is the sin of the romanticists. But there is a happy mean: the humanistic law of concentration and selection, of a *will* intent upon *truth*. Real freedom is that of a spirit which knows and owns its limitations; the need of the hour is form, in the Aristotelian sense, which will permit sanity and encourage humane feeling in the midst of the confusions of sense and spirit which Romanticism has engendered. "If art is to have humane purpose . . . intuitions of sense must come under the control of the higher intuitions." Or, as he elsewhere says, "What we have in the great artists is the intellectualising of sensations, and not . . . the sensualising of the intellect." Finally: "The Greeks at their best had humane standards and held them flexibly. They thus effected in some degree that mediation between the One and the Many that is the highest wisdom of life."

III

In our estimate of Lessing we criticised his defective psychology. To a degree this was an incidental criticism; for Lessing's main contention is not a subtle one; and since his analysis turns upon the nature of the æsthetic stimulus rather than the æsthetic experience, his defects, in the matter of psychology, limit the application rather than the essential truth of his theories. But the case is obviously different with the more recent critic. Professor Babbitt transfers the discussion bodily to a psychical realm; the romantic confusion of the arts is, he tells us, an inner and experiential confusion; it is due to unfocal thinking and feeling, not to confounded sight and sound. Very clearly, the value of criticism from this point of view must

depend upon its psychological truth: whether intentionally or not the critic has diverted his profession from an analysis of matters to an analysis of mind; he has transformed criticism into psychology, and it is reasonable that his thought should be met on his own grounds.

I may illustrate the psychological turn by certain current antitheses: there is "inner" and "outer," intellect and sense, feeling and will, imagination and reason; and if we will apply these terms according to the formula, we shall find that the volitional, intellectual, and reasonable is the proper definition of what is classical and humane and in some precious meaning "higher," while the emotional, sensible, and imaginative defines what is romantic and naturalistic and axiomatically "lower" in our mortal experience. When the matter is put in this bald form, one begins to suspect that our modern mode is not wholly redeemed from the fallacious seductiveness of *Schematismus!* At the least, we are on our guard against that illusion of order which is so often introduced into complex subjects by the deft arrangement of categories.

If there is, as I suspect, an error underlying this neat itemising of æsthetic experience, it is yet an error peculiar to no one critic; and before endeavouring to lay it open, we may pause to consider other instances. Professor Babbitt (accepting his own definitions) is a stout classicist, while Professor Fairchild discusses *The Making of Poetry* from a point of view which can be only that of the unsubdued romantic. For him poetry is indefinable; it "begins and ends in feeling"; whatever is to be said about it must be said from an external, from a circumferential point of view. However, since this outer attitude permits his book to analyse the elements, creation, value, and even the "real nature" of poetry, it cannot be supposed that we have lost much in losing the "definability" of the poet's art. To begin with, the material of poetry is mental images; the language which stimulates these is merely an outer and servile circumstance. But these images must be more than replications of nature if we are to have poetry; they must be "personalisations"—that is, absorptions of nature by the poet's personality. "Everywhere there is a going out of my own nature," writes our critic; "I identify myself with all that exists in thought, action, or person, not my own. Everywhere I carry on a process of self-projection; I put myself into the life and action of people and of things; I humanise them."

Corollary to this is the notion that form, verse-form, is purely adventitious: "versifying," we are told, "finds its most satisfactory explanation, not through consideration of its external form, but in terms of its inner effects." This analysis leads up to the doctrine that the nature of poetry is "self-realisation,"—poetry is "a form of pleasurable and unified self-realisation" which "must represent either something new that is valued, or, if not something new, something known and wished for, but not consistently attained in feeling, thought, or action."

It would be difficult to find a more unadulterated statement of the "romantic" point of view than is this of Professor Fairchild's,—which, it is but fair to add, he supports with a liberal analysis of materials drawn chiefly from sources which are confessedly of the romantic movement. We can imagine that Professor Babbitt might feel nervous at Professor Fairchild's pre-emption of the term "humanism" to designate his philosophy of art; for "self-projection" and "self-realisation," in the expansive and catholic sense employed by the latter, is as far as can be from that "concentration of the will" which is the former's definition of humanism. But after all can an impartial arbiter deny the right of either conception? "Concentration of the will" is a reasonable interpretation of μηδὲν ἄγαν, but "self-projection" may no less reasonably be inferred from "*esse is percipi*," and each of these rests with equal right upon the prior humanistic maxim, "Know thyself." And it is not without point that the critical philosophies of our two exponents, though following very different routes, are altogether neighbourly in their conclusions; for between "that mediation between the One and the Many that is the highest wisdom of life" for Professor Babbitt, and the "feeling of unity attained and continuity of experience emphasised" in which Professor Fairchild sees the value of poetry, the difference is verbal rather than speculative.

As much cannot be said of another book which also must be classed as the expression of an unsubdued romantic. The very title of Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Poetry* is meant to shunt it off from all those philosophies of art which centre on will and reason; in place of these, emotion and the senses are for Dr. Eastman warp and woof of the poetic fabric. He begins his discussion with a sharp severation of the poetic from the practical; people are of two kinds, "some of them are chiefly occupied with attaining ends, some with receiving experiences"; it is the latter

who compose the tribe of poets. Now the distinguishing mark of the two temperaments is their use of names; the practical man will select names which familiarise "adjustments," the poetical will employ epithets which challenge "realisation." "Is the right name of water *wet*, or is it H_2O ?" Here we have the antithesis set: a perfect algebra is the ideal of the practical reason, while poetry is "the art of calling names."

We are not surprised on being led to infer from this that Homer and Shakespeare get their lesson from folklore, or that poetic wisdom is most certain to be found on the lips of babes, savages, and yokels. "Poetry is of necessity the language both of children who do not understand the general names of things, and savages who have not decided upon those names"; and "poetry is a countryman, and greets every experience by its own name." Framed from this calibre the essence of poetry is the monosyllables of thought; it is an art of words, of morsels succulent or bitter, each giving as its delight some special delice or poignancy—and if my talk seem to savour closely of the cuisine, it is yet untrue to our critic's conception only in that for him poetry makes real for us objects of sense which can but verbally pass our lips. "Millions of so-called 'stories' are current among men, women, and children of which the climax is not humour but poetry, a vivid filth."¹ Plato, we will remember, not even for the sake of scientific consistency would admit "hair" and "filth" into the aristocracy of the Ideas,—and perhaps this is a measure of the distance we have come unto a time when poetic effulgence is found even upon offal.

To be sure, ideas have a kind of place in Dr. Eastman's theory. They are not valued in poetry for their use—which is their essence—but for what is adventitious to their being; the poet "loves the idea, as he loves the thing, for its suggestiveness, its discursiveness, its inapplicabilities." "The realisation of ideas is a part of the adventure of being"; but it is made sufficiently clear to us that, on the whole, it is much the poorer part. The

¹ Our author adds, "This is the dry rot of poetry." But on his theory, there is no reason for this judgment except his temperamental dislike of filth. On the other hand, taking his own valuation of words for their suggestive qualities, there is perfect right on the part of anyone who cares vigorously to deny that "filth" is ever "poetry." The word *poetry*, as Eastman's description acknowledges, has won for itself a flavour which distinctly proclaims that it *has* something to do with beauty,—a flavour, I may add, upon which the author often, if unconsciously, relies to persuade assent to his judgments.

qualities which make the poet are sensitiveness, sympathy, and self-knowledge; and while each of these qualities is excellent in itself, it is evident, from the limitation of the catalogue, which way the wind sets: sensitiveness is the quality of a mind perceptually resilient, sympathy calls for quick-welling emotion, while self-knowledge is here no Greek thing, but something more surely the possession of indigenes and sucklings than of sages and kings.

In fact, what is called *mind*—and in particular, poetic mind—“is itself a part of *things*” as far as these engender experience. “The poetic impulse is a love of that experience for its own sake. Poetic creation begins in us when we marry, with such love, the images of memory to the impressions of sense, and when to this union we set the seal of a vivid and communicable name we are poets in the full and divine sense. We are makers of a world.”

Here poetry is not, as it is with Professor Fairchild, an outward flowing of the ego, familiarising and personalising a world of unillumined externalities; rather it is the chaotic precipitate of mind particles upon the things themselves, or (perhaps more in the spirit of Dr. Eastman) it is the myriad dew crystallised upon the world's gardens for the morning's intoxication;—one jewelled moment it sparkles to the sun's flame, then vanishes forever. Here is no talk of concentration, but only of dissipation; nothing to be garnered or gained, but all for profligate spending.

Nor does the will fare better than the reason in the compounding of the poetic experience. To be sure, we are told that poetry is a manifestation of the “will to live”; but we recognise this will as the blind and distempered passion for life philosophised by Schopenhauer rather than any guided control of conduct. Life is a reasonless adventure, with surety only in its present gift, and poetry, whose office it is to catch the momentary glint of momentary things, obtains its excellence just in “a vivifying of present experience in an adventurous world.” If poetry has no portion with purpose, naturally it has none with consecutive action. It was the accident of Greek form that made Aristotle regard tragedy as poetry, according to Dr. Eastman; narrative is not properly poetry at all, but a satisfaction of the appetites of the will; Shakespeare is the poet of action not because he is a creator of drama, but because he excels all others in galvanising thought by images of action: “Look to Shakespeare for the poetry of verbs.” The upshot of it all is that “poetry is a series of

pictures accompanied by appropriate music,"—which is a flaring defiance to Lessing and Mr. Babbitt.

By the time we have been taught that poetry is the parti-coloured babble of infants and primitives, that it is akin to magic and adventure and Bacchanalian orgy, that even the rhythm, which seems to give it tautness and form, is but a lethargising hypnosis, by this time we begin to misdoubt the very possibility of such a thing as a poem or a poetic work; and, despite the relish of many palatable phrases and some fair-said truths, in the presence of the obvious fact of literature, we turn from the *Enjoyment of Poetry* with the feeling that the most its author has done is to make a saucy statement of a bad case.

IV

The question which naturally occurs to us sociable human beings, when we encounter sharp antitheticals contrariwise shaping our conduct and conceptions, is whether there may not be some comfortable and compromising middle way, friendly to each extreme. William Allan Neilson's *The Essentials of Poetry* is a search for such a *via media* between "classicism" and "romanticism." Neilson agrees with the current diagnosis in making imagination the distinctive mark of romanticism; it is associated with the "rediscovery of the soul" and the "return to Nature," with emotionalism and naturalism, and with that expansiveness of temperament which drives your romantic to seek his theme in the far-away and the unfamiliar, in barbarous Outlands or Mediæval Thules: "emotion stimulates imagination and is stimulated by it in turn, and in so far as the free expression of natural human feeling in a poem is due to imaginative causes, it is to be reckoned as a romantic character,"—emotion, imagination, free expression of feeling; it is the familiar formula. Classicism, on the other hand, is intimately dependent upon reason: "the predominance of the rational and formal element in art results in the tendency known as classicism." Predominance of reason necessarily means an especial concern with the peculiar instruments of reasoning, namely, abstract ideas. But this involves, in the first place, loss of imaginative vividness and emotional stress, for both imagination and emotion are essentially concrete, not abstract; and in the second place, it involves the ever-present endangering of that very character for which vividness

is sacrificed, and that is truth; for while truth is necessarily expressed in general terms, generality is by nature formal; and when we have to do with matters so capriciously elevated from the phenomenal world as are æsthetic matters, then, more than elsewhere, is formality in danger of resolving into formalism. Classicism stresses form; but its peril is lest in our passion for formal perfection we lose our sense for fact. So Aristotle caustically says of the Pythagoreans: "All the properties of numbers and scales which they could show to agree with the attributes and parts and the whole arrangement of the heavens, they collected and fitted into their scheme; and if there was a gap anywhere, they readily made additions so as to make their whole theory coherent."

It is just for the avoidance of like emptinesses that the "sense of fact" which we find in realism has come to be so valued a quality, says Professor Neilson. The sense of fact is the salt substance of literature, "lending steadiness to imagination and supplying material to reason," though "resulting, when it exists in isolation or excess, in its own characteristic kind of failure." The case is that imagination, reason, and the sense of fact must all be maintained in a happy proportionality if we are to have creations of the first value, and the quality which can so maintain them he finds in "intensity." The situation is presented in a quaint allegory:

"Up the sides of Parnassus labour the would-be poets coming by the three main roads of imagination, reason, and the sense of fact. Those who have arrived at the top are camped on that side of the plateau next the road by which they ascended, and the camps are called by the names Romantic, Classic, and Realistic. There are other roads and other camps, but so far we have concerned ourselves with only these three. The great leaders, however, are to be found, not in the heart of any one of these camps, but, in proportion to their greatness, towards the middle of the plateau. The farther from this great centre, the more partisan they become, and down the slopes on each side and out on the plains of prose one sees little figures waving their party banners and shouting their party cries, far from the summit of victory at whose centre is a great peace."

The quality of "intensity" is, as it were, the radiance which suffuses this Parnassian height. If we wish for a more definite description; "It is what the modern critic means—when he means anything—by temperament. It is often called merely emotion, or feeling, or passion,"—though it is more than is

conveyed by any one of these terms, being a kind of alembic quality whose one office is to redeem all other qualities from dross.

With these four qualities the centre of Professor Neilson's critical edifice is completed. They constitute a statement of the æsthetic core of literary art. There are other qualities,—for example, he treats sentiment and humour; but these have to do with the ethical side of art, æsthetics as affected by ethics, rather than with its untouched essence: sentiment builds up and humour criticises ideals of conduct rather than patterns of beauty, and hence these qualities are incidental in criticism.

Beyond question, we have here an attractive platting of the "middle way." Inevitably we ask, is it satisfying? is it an adequate and workable philosophy of criticism? In order to answer such questions, we must, I think, resume our consideration of the psychological theory which, with curious uniformity, underlies all these diverse critical excursions.

V

Professor Neilson, when he is seeking a text for his treatise, chooses a passage from Bacon's *Great Instauration*, to wit: "The best division of human learning is that derived from the three faculties of the rational soul, which is the seat of learning. History has reference to the Memory, poesy to the Imagination, and philosophy to the Reason." In the light of this passage it is easy to see upon what support rests Professor Neilson's division of realistic, romantic, and classic; for the sense of fact, imagination, and reason in poetry are but the manifestations of the three faculties set in relief by Bacon's partition.

Perhaps the most signal effect of Bacon's work has been the sense of form, and the form of the sense of form, which it has imposed upon modern critical thinking. Bacon developed, with great elaboration, his notion of the relation of the fields of learning to the faculties of the rational soul; and in that veritable incarnation of the spirit of the Enlightenment, *L'Encyclopédie . . . ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, as its title continues, . . . as explained by d'Alembert in the *Discours préliminaire*, Bacon's arrangement is made the model for the encyclopædic organisation of all human knowledge. The influence of this work upon later thought is wellnigh universal;

and certainly, in all branches of criticism, where perspective is essential to sound conclusions, the spirit of the *Encyclopædia* is autocratic.

Now it is quite obvious that Bacon's division, and the point of view which it has engendered, is a psychological one. Is the psychology true and sufficient? This is our inevitable question; and if the achievements of psychological science in modern times are in any degree to be taken seriously, it has only to be asked to be answered in the negative. For the psychologist of to-day, though he may still use the notion of faculties in his provisional analyses, is perfectly aware of their fictive nature. For him the human mind is not a thing to be dissected, part from part, the parts duly prepared and labelled, and then properly exhibited in museum array; rather, he conceives it as a living reality, whose action is always one and simple though its description may be many and complex; it is not a composite structure of faculties, nor yet of states; it is growing and adaptive and unifying, as are all forms of life, and its essence is its operation. As it is with the mind, so is it with experience as a whole, and especially with those products of experience by which we judge what is essential humanity.

Now if we turn from the psychologist to the critic, what do we find? In the first place, an ostensible psychologising of his subject-matters, a passage from the “outer” to the “inner,” from the stimulus to the experience; and in the second place, no accompanying understanding of psychological problems.¹ The psychology of Bacon and the Mediævalists is still all-sufficient for the commentators upon art; they still discourse in terms of wits and faculties quite oblivious of the changed intentions which scientific progress has brought to these terms; and they fail utterly to apply, and apparently to grasp, the conception of mind and its creations, which, I venture to affirm, is not only the modern, but also the conception of the best of the Greeks, for it is Plato who tells us that “being is power,” and Aristotle who says that “actuality is work, action,” and who defines the soul as actuality.

¹ Dr. Eastman does recognise the more modern view, but he makes no essential use of it. “Probably any theory which regards the laboratory analysis of our experience into emotion, sensation, affection, image, idea, and so forth, as a final truth, will itself prove but temporary. We are safer when we talk of experience as a whole.”

Plutarch, in one of his catechetical paragraphs, asks how many are the senses, and responds that according to the Stoic school there are five—sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch,—but that Aristotle adds to these a “common sense” whose business it is to perceive the compounded forms given us by the representations of the special senses, and likewise to reveal those developments in nature which appear in our perceptions of change. This sixth sense exercises an hegemony over all the others, from the simple fact that it alone deals with that actuality of action which is the essential being at once of outer nature and of the soul—a fair and pragmatic reason, by the way, why it should be the lineal source of our own prized “common sense.”

Now the critics seem all to cleave to the decadent Stoic psychology. When they are dealing with the physical senses only, as in the case of Lessing, their conclusion may be, as Lessing's is, a sound if narrow theory. But when they would pass from this external and safe province to the more central facts of æsthetic experience, their dangers are multiplied and, we fear, their weaknesses made evident. In the cases resumed we have illustration. Mr. Babbitt's theory rests upon antitheses of sense and intellect, emotion and will, which govern his conceptions and determine his formulæ,—as if there could be intellect devoid of sense, or will apart from feeling, or either pair in independence of the other. Mr. Neilson has memory, imagination, and reason in Baconian compartments of the mind, ready to serve as the proper keys to æsthetic intelligibility. Mr. Fairchild, after postulating an indefinable thing-in-itself called feeling, as the essence of poetry, proceeds to divide a material of phantasma from a combining-form of poetic intelligence; and so deems that he has marked out for us some advance in some direction worth pursuing. Finally, Mr. Eastman would compound poetry of sense-perception, emotion, and memory, leaving will and intellect to be the concern of the man of affairs. The pertinent question is, to what does all such criticism lead? The classifications which it engenders are not true; it cannot define the proper themes or modes of æsthetic creation; and it can hardly be expected to give reliable guidance to our tastes. The total impression which it conveys, after one has taken time for sober analysis of its meaning, is of the substitution of eloquent but empty “abracadabras” for the familiar term “spade”; and the lesson it conveys is, if

anything, the reiteration of Lessing's wise caution: “*Nichts ist betrüglicher als allgemeine Gesetze für unsere Empfindungen.*”

VI

But though we condemn the psychology of the critics, as antiquated and inadequate, there is another point of view, which is, indeed, a prior point of view, from which their conclusions may be judged. The prior view is the philosophical, and it raises a question which may reasonably be regarded as essentially precedent to such psychological discussion of the boundaries of the arts as is found in the *Laokoon* and similar treatises.

We will take our departure from the current conceptions of “romantic” and “classic,” giving to these terms as precise an interpretation as their customarily loose employment will permit. The sharp antithesis of sense and intellect, feeling and will, imagination and reason, we must reject as inherently false, and conducive only to hypostatical idols and epithetical combats. We will thus avoid such absurd prejudgments as that sensible beauty is necessarily inferior to intellectual because sense is in some mystical meaning “lower” and intellect “higher”; or that unions of sense and intellect which we demand in poetry, under the forms of imagination and reason, are impure and bastard when they occur in musical art; or that emotion is a thing that can be operated upon and cured by will, rather than an intrinsic phase of volitional experience. These are assumptions which spoil our tempers without advancing our wisdom; and since they are grounded in unreality we will pass them by, and we will turn to inquire what legitimate philosophical meanings underlie our terms.

As I see it, the metaphysical burden conveyed by “romantic versus classic” is that of the particular as contrasted with the general or of the changing as opposed to the changeless. The two terms denote attitudes toward experience and methods of presenting impressions derived from nature. Neither method has any prerogatory claim as the *vera causa* either of knowledge or of beauty, and each must prove its own value. Nor is either justly condemned by pointing out, for example, that the romantic affection of mind is neither humble nor economical, or that the classical purchases its clear and distinct definition by confining itself to superficial ideas, while its immaculate form is only the

rigor mortis that for a moment preserves the aspect of life from imminent decay. Such judgments do not condemn until we have first inquired whether arrogance and wastefulness, superficiality and mechanical rigidity are sins and are avoidable; and these questions we cannot answer until we know under what conditions knowledge and beauty are humanly attainable, and, I may add, in what sense they are good.

We must resume, in other words, the Greek mode of criticism, which was an ethical mode, but ethical in the most philosophical sense. I do not mean that we should parrot the Greeks, prig-ishly asserting, as some do, that they have once for all uttered all that can worthily be said. There is rather every reason why we should avail ourselves of that distinction of moral and æsthetic which we see and which they failed to see, so that in place of *καλακᾶγαθία* we shall discuss *καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν*, seeking to determine their likeness and difference in the total ordination of experience. And having placed our criticism upon such basis as this, we shall then surely be able to appraise our activities with a more certain justice.

This conception of criticism is not "classical" in the current sense; but it is, I believe, true to the Greek mode. For it is difficult to imagine any Greek condemning the principle of evolution as our modern "classicists" condemn it, or yet proposing that separation of man and nature of which we make so much. Our classicists are too often men made timid by possessions, fearful of venturing the new lest they cease to prize what they already have; and the romanticist is to them a man gone mad with arrogant ambitions. It is as if the heavy saurians of Mesozoic ages were to reproach the first of the winged tribe because of their aspiration: "Behold us," they would say, "are we not perfect? our articulate scales, our iridescent armour, shield and crest and serrate spine,—could aught be more beautiful? And ye—scant-feathered, toothless, beaked,—what seek ye in the empty air? The stable and occupied earth is the proper abode of temperate life!" We can imagine what Plato would say in reply to this, for he utters it in a great passage—the figure of the winged horses and the charioteer and the period of thrice ten thousand years of effort to attain to the divine vision, whereof the memory is such that he who recalls it, forgets his earthly affairs and is rapt in the divine, while the vulgar deem him mad and upbraid him, seeing not that he is inspired.

Nor will our modern classicists, I imagine, derive much comfort from Plato in their notion that discursive and dichotomising reason is the prime support of intelligence, for it is the master of dialectic himself who says that when "all philosophers with one voice assert mind to be king of heaven and earth, in reality they are but magnifying themselves." The truth is, as Plato of all men most persistently recognised, there is more than one form of human experience and more than one form of knowledge. Reason is one such form, and none judges it more highly than did Plato; but there are other forms that cannot be expressed in the discourse of reason.

Can they be expressed, and do they deserve expression, in the discourse of the arts? This is a metaphysical question and it must be answered by metaphysical considerations. It was Pascal, I believe, who defined metaphysics as "a sophisticated poetry." A countryman of Pascal's, writing of Greek poetry, gives the obverse and truer statement: *La métaphysique est l'âme de toute poésie*. And if metaphysics is the soul of all poetry, is it not evident that our modern critics must become, what the great critics of antiquity were, metaphysicians first and judges of literature afterwards? Nor will any critic so equipped feel that his humanism is imperilled because our modern understanding of nature, far more penetrating than that of any Greek, has vastly extended our conception of human endeavour. Rather he will feel that this expansion of our mortal prospect is a challenge to our powers of expression, and judging our modern art by the greatness of the demands made upon it rather than by the weakness with which it too often meets these demands, he will prophetically see its bright future and inspiringly guide it upon the path of attainment.

HARTLEY B. ALEXANDER.

University of Nebraska.