

## CHAPTER IX

### THE QUESTION OF THE HIGHEST ART

IN taking this title for the present short lecture, I have not said "literary art," but simply art. That is because I think that all the arts are so related to each other, and to some form of highest truth, that each obeys the same laws as the others, and manifests the same principles. Of course I intend to refer especially to literary art; but in order to do this effectually, I must first speak about art in general.

I take it that art signifies the emotional expression of life in some form or other. This may be expressed in music, in painting, in sculpture, in poetry, in drama, or in fiction. Truth to life is the object even of the best fiction—though the story in itself may not be true, or may even be impossible. But it has of course been said that the kinds of art are almost innumerable. The question that I want to answer is this: "What is the highest form of art?"

Without attempting to discuss the different kinds of art in any way, I think we may fairly assume that intellectual life represents something higher than physical life, and that ethical life represents something higher still. In short, the position of Spencer that moral beauty is far superior to intellectual beauty, ought to be a satisfactory guide to the answer of this question. If moral beauty be the very highest possible form of beauty, then the highest possible form of art should be that which expresses it.

I do not think that anybody would deny these premises from a philosophical point of view. But the mere statement that moral beauty ought to be ranked above all other beauty, and that the highest art should necessarily express moral beauty, leaves a vague and unsatisfactory impression upon the mind. It is not very easy to answer the question, "How

can music or painting or sculpture or poetry or fiction represent moral beauty?" And have I not often told you that books written for a moral purpose are nearly always in-artistic and unsatisfactory?

It seems to me that a solution of this difficulty is at least suggested by the experience of love.

To love another human being is really a moral experience, although this fact is very commonly overlooked. You might say, "That is all very fine, but how can it be a moral experience to love a bad person, or to love for sense and self?" I shall answer that the selfish side of the feeling has no importance at all; and that whether the person loved be good or bad or indifferent is also of no importance. I mean that the experience is not at all affected as to its moral side by the immorality of the conditions of it. Certainly it is a great misfortune and a great folly to love a bad person; but in spite of the misfortune and the folly a certain moral experience comes, which has immense value to a wholesome nature. The experience is one which very few of the poets and philosophers dwell upon; yet it is the only important, the supremely important, part of the experience. What is it? It is the sudden impulse to unselfishness. For there are two sides to every passion of love in a normal human life. One side is selfish; the other side, and the stronger, is unselfish. In other words, one of the first results of truly loving another human being is the sudden wish to die for the sake of that person, to endure anything, to attempt anything difficult or dangerous for the benefit of the person beloved. That is what Tennyson refers to in the celebrated verse about the chord of Self suddenly disappearing. The impulse to self-sacrifice is the moral experience of loving; and this experience is not necessarily confined to the kind of affection described by Tennyson. Other forms of love may produce the same result. Strong faith may do it. Patriotism may do it. I have only mentioned the ordinary form of love, because it is the most universal experience, and most likely to produce the moral impulse, the unselfish desire to suffer

pain, to suffer loss, or even to suffer death, for the sake of a person loved.

I know that mere beauty of form may produce such emotion, though beauty of form is by no means the highest source of moral inspiration. There is a possible relation between physical and moral beauty; but it does not seem to be a relation now often realized in this imperfect world. Intellectual beauty never, I think, excites our affection—though it may excite our admiration. Moral beauty, the highest of all, has indeed been a supreme source of unselfish action; but it has moved men's minds chiefly through super-human ideals, and very seldom through the words or acts of a person, an individual. It must be confessed that in a person we are much more ready to perceive the lower than the higher forms of beauty.

But in this we have a suggestion of possible values in regard to future art. Taking it for granted that some forms of beauty inspire men with such affection as to make them temporarily unselfish, I do not see any reason to doubt that in future very much higher forms of beauty will produce the same effect. I should say that the highest form of art must necessarily be such art as produces upon the beholder the same moral effect that the passion of love produces in a generous lover. Such art would be a revelation of moral beauty for which it were worth while to sacrifice self,—of moral ideas for which it were a beautiful thing to die. Such an art ought to fill men even with a passionate desire to give up life, pleasure, everything, for the sake of some grand and noble purpose. Just as unselfishness is the real test of strong affection, so unselfishness ought to be the real test of the very highest kind of art. Does this art make you feel generous, make you willing to sacrifice yourself, make you eager to attempt some noble undertaking? If it does, then it belongs to the higher class of art, if not to the very highest. But if a work of art, whether sculpture or painting or poem or drama, does not make us feel kindly, more generous, morally better than we were before seeing

it, then I should say that, no matter how clever, it does not belong to the highest forms of art.

By this statement I do not mean in the least to decry such art as the sculpture of the Greeks, as the painting of the Italians—not at all. The impression of great sculpture and a great painting, like the impression of grand music, *is* to make us feel more kindly to our fellowmen, more unselfish in our actions, more exalted in our aspirations. When art has not this effect, it is often because the nature of man is deficient, not because his art is bad. But I do not know that any art which has existed in the past could be called the highest possible. The highest possible ought to be, I think, one that treats of ethical ideals, not physical ideals, and of which the effect should be a purely moral enthusiasm. Sculpture, painting, music,—these arts can never, I imagine, attempt the highest art in the sense that I mean. But drama, poetry, great romance or fiction, in other words, great literature, may attempt the supreme, and very probably will do so at some future time.