

CHAPTER XVII

NOTE UPON AN UGLY SUBJECT

THE ugly subject is the literature of hate.

Hitherto we have been chiefly and properly concerned with the literature of higher things—love, beauty, heroism, courage. Can there be a literature of ugliness?—or, is moral ugliness or any kind of ugliness a fit subject for art?

Do you know that this is a very hard question to answer in these days? The old Greeks would have answered it unqualifiedly. Perhaps that is the best way to answer it. We need not long discuss whether a single statue or a single picture of something merely ugly and foul ought to be made or not. The public judgment would answer such a question effectively. But it is very different if we ask whether there is any reason for representing the ugly figure in a general way. Drama at once furnishes us an answer. The figures of drama are horrible as well as beautiful, bad as well as good,—and the greater the dramatist, as a rule, the greater the evil in his bad character. In Shakespeare, for example, the dark side serves to make visible the bright side; evil is the shadow that brings out the brilliancy of the picture.

So there can be no dispute as to the place of the evil and the ugly in drama and in dramatic fiction. But it is quite another matter, when we have to consider an attempt to portray the ugliness and the evil all by itself. Is that right? Is it art? I do not think it is. But if I say that I do not think it is right, I am raising at once an endless and perfectly useless question about the moral purpose in art. If I were asked to give a reason why I do not think it is right to represent what is ugly in a statue or in a picture, I should be obliged to take refuge in an emotional expression of the

feelings which the ugly arouses in me. So that my argument would be reduced to something like this: "I do not like it, because it hurts my feelings, grates upon my nerves, spoils my pleasure in life." And that is only a personal argument. Not all people feel the same way. There was a Spanish painter who used to paint putrefied corpses, and he still has admirers.

Now the literature of satire mostly belongs to the ugly side of existence. When we were considering the history of eighteenth century literature, we were obliged to remark the cruelty and malignity which the literary men displayed in that age. They wrote, in the most perfect of verse, the most abominable things about each other; they very frequently slandered each other in a most shameful manner; with words they painted pictures of each other quite as horrible as those pictures of rotten corpses which the Spanish artist made. And, like that Spanish artist, they still have admirers. Students are obliged as a duty to read some of the eighteenth century satires; all the great critics admire them. Good old Dr. Johnson did not; he declared the most admired of them to be a useless display of malignity and jealousy. But people laugh at Dr. Johnson's moral judgment in these days. Much greater scholars than Dr. Johnson persist in praising many things that he condemned.

In the face of this high testimony to the value of the satirical literature of the eighteenth century, we cannot merely rely like Dr. Johnson upon our moral feelings. We must think about the matter—we must try to find a good clear reason for the praise given to wicked things cleverly said by men like Pope. Are we to praise clever wickedness? Have we any right to admire it? Or would not such admiration be proof that we are not particularly good ourselves?

The real answer to the problem can only be found by the perception of something in the wicked cleverness which is not wicked cleverness. Here excellence of verse forms does not explain the matter at all. There must be something else—something that is not false but true. Now what is this thing?

It is truth in the delineation, not of a man, but of a type.

There is the secret of the admiration still given to some of the unjust and cruel satires of Pope and of his school. It is not because the satires were true pictures or caricatures of any living person in particular, but because they were true pictures of general types of human weakness which have always existed, which exist to-day and which will exist to-morrow. By their general truth they lived, and for nothing else can they be admired. And, observe, whenever Pope's satires do not reflect something larger than personal hate, nobody admires him. It is only when the personal hate has given him eyes to see larger facts, that we may really praise the utterance of the hatred. No better example of the power to see a type and to fix that type need be quoted than the few lines of Pope's very best satire, the lines about Addison. I think you have read enough about Addison to know that Pope's picture of him was not true, that Pope himself afterwards acknowledged that it was not true, that Addison was a gentle, courteous, correct, and somewhat cold person, but not a hypocrite nor a sneak. Yet for a moment Pope suspecting him of a mean act, conceived a picture of hypocrisy and meanness, such as had never before been written, and he printed it. Let us read a few lines:

Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
 Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne.
 View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
 And hate for arts that caus'd himself to rise;
 Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
 And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
 Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,
 Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;
 Alike reserv'd to blame, or to commend,
 A tim'rous foe, and a suspicious friend.*

It does not matter who was intended by such piercing lines as these; every one feels in reading them that they are unimpeachably true, atrociously and mercilessly true, of a

* *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, ll. 197—206.

certain type of human nature that is as old as the history of civilization. It is not to be wondered at that the art of drawing so true a picture in a dozen lines should still be praised; it is not to be wondered at that certain lines have become household words and English idioms—for instance, the lines about damning with faint praise and about making other people sneer, without sneering yourself.

I think we can say that the artistic question is partly solved by such a quotation. If hatred gives new eyes to a man and enables him to see more general truth in a powerful way, the literature of hatred may be worthy of a certain kind of admiration. But I should certainly think that to shrink from all such literature is a proof of a generous mind.