

XXVII

THE CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF FORM

1. *The Critic's Function*

MANY people cannot apprehend either form or colour, as manifest in nature and in their artificial surroundings, unless set before them through the medium of graphic art or photography. Such usually prefer an oil painting as the intermediary instrument. They can only really see indirectly; and can be relied on to take more interest in a picture on a wall than in a view from a window. If they attend a football match, a horse-race, or a stage play, they may exercise good judgement of football, horse-flesh, or dramatic situations, but the spectacle, as such, leaves them cold. But let them contemplate the spirit of a match, a race, or a play, in extract, projected on a plane (a cinema screen will do), and they glow. For one of these his grandmother remains just his grandmother, till some competent artist paints her portrait: then she becomes the 'grand old lady'. That kind of person is apt to rave over the works of Peter de Hooch, which are well worth raving over; but he can see nothing interesting in the interiors which other Dutchmen of his time devised for Peter's delight. But some do learn to see things after they have seen pictures of them. Painters and draughtsmen learn to see still more through exercise in depiction.

And just as some require the intervention of the painter before they can see and feel, so others require the intervention of the critic who offers his verbal translation, however inadequate, before they can apprehend anything worth while as to works of art they might contemplate directly any day in the year. It is a function of critical appreciation to minister especially to the needs of such underprivileged children of misfortune, and to afford them a blink of the spiritual life reflected 'as in a glass darkly'. Now students of art are very generally regarded as in this underprivileged state: many regard themselves as so; some quite erroneously.

2. *Critical Method*

It is no part of the intention, in this chapter, to advise literary exponents of the appreciation of things seen as to their business.

The following remarks are addressed solely to those who have recourse to their writings, that they may be in the better position to derive the more profit therefrom, where profit is derivable.

The impossibility of completely translating artistic impression from one medium to another must be kept in mind. Words, however fairly used, must fall far short of conveying to another what the sight of a thing conveyed to him who writes or speaks of it. Drawing—itself a purely mechanical activity, no matter how skilful—may come near to sufficiency, but words fall far short. The critical appreciation is itself a new expression which may possibly be a work of art. Critical appreciation of music rarely attempts the impossible task of reconstructing musical impression out of words, contenting itself for the most part with revival in memory. But, because a thing seen can be very fully described in words, and can also be very fully described in drawing, there is a temptation to regard the impressions derivable from these two kinds of description as far more nearly interchangeable than they can possibly be. Because of such limitations, one must not infer that critical appreciation of form is impotent. It can be both potent and stimulating.

It is important that the reader of critical appreciations of things seen should watch the tactics of his author and try to keep aware, all the time he is reading, of what the author is at. Is he describing a thing he sees or has seen; describing his impressions and feelings on seeing it; describing the impressions and feelings he thinks he ought to have experienced; or describing those he thinks the reader ought to experience? Is he conveying information on the technique the artist has employed; on the subject-matter on which the artist's work is based; or asserting relations between the technique and the impression, between the technique and the subject-matter, between the subject-matter and the impression? Is he theorizing at large, saying he likes it, saying why he likes it, just begging the question and calling it beautiful, or implying that all who do not agree with him that it is beautiful have bad taste?

Now even the best and most fascinatingly readable exponents of critical appreciation show extraordinary versatility in changing their tactics half a dozen times on a page and often twice within a sentence. Whether it is the case of a monograph on a monolith, or a dissertation on all the stones of Venice, this illusive 'ring craft' has usually to be reckoned with as part of the game.

Critical appreciation, from the nature of things, is indulged in with zeal. The critic inevitably sets out to convert to his view, to infect with his emotion, to justify his taste. Like all 'bonny fechtlers' with their blood up, he dissembles intuitively and unconsciously just when his reader least expects it. The reader must, on his side, spar with caution and use his head so as to accept only those blows to the heart that come straight with undeniable force; and not be caught with deceptions that leave him parrying thin air while points are scored that should not have got home.

By way of warning the reader of critical appreciations to be on his guard as to what the critic might be at, an alarming series of questions was formulated touching his tactics. These are far from constituting an exhaustive list. It would not be difficult to exemplify each and all of these tactical schemes, showing at the same time that some of the more popular among them are founded in fallacy. These exercises may be left to the reader.

3. *The Scope*

It is now time to confine the field of critical appreciation of form within the limits appropriate to a discourse on design. The concern is not with the interpretation of abstract form; that, if it can be done, is for mathematics: nor yet with the interpretation of materialized manifestation of form in nature's animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms; that is for the natural sciences. What one has here to do with is the interpretation of certain of the activities of man, those involving the reduction of material to his service in the apparatus of life. These always involve expression and sometimes art. Critical appreciation of form, thus restricted, may concern itself with the expressional interpretation only. When there is art in the case, it may concern itself with both the expressional and the artistic interpretation; or with the artistic interpretation only.

Discussion may now proceed on the several matters on which the critical appreciation of a building may be expected to touch. If a building is selected rather than a ship, a vehicle, a piece of furniture, a garment, or a utensil, it is not because the same general elements are not involved in every one of these, but for the reason that, in a building, these elements are within the experience of most of the persons likely to read these pages.

4. *Appreciation of Plan*

First take the plan of the building—the entire functional disposition of parts, great and small, in space; not the plan in the narrower technical sense of disposition in the horizontal plane only. The plan may be a perfect expression, admirable in a thousand ways, a demonstration of the highest inspiration of skill and understanding, all without a jot or tittle of artistic activity about it. The solution of the problem may be regularly symmetrical, or irregular, and its being the one, or the other, may entail no artistic merit. Can art, in the sense defined in these pages, enter into the plan at all? Assuredly it can; but if it does, it is always with some sacrifice or detriment to the perfection of the expression as pure design; and usually with the intent to give emphasis to some characteristics of the plan itself. The vehicle of the art element may be a geometric regularity, or it may be an incidence of light and shade within the interior, or an abstracted simplification, or the dominance of the in some way important and the subordination of the somehow less important. The designer, become artist, loses some of his integrity as a purveyor of pure design, to balance the account in another medium of exchange. The great designer, when also a great artist, defaults but little, that he may pay back a hundred-fold. *Il faut souffrir pour être belle* is but a quarter-truth. Art in design is not a question of an option between grace and solution; it is a matter of search for the graceful solution.

Critical appreciation applied to a plan may well exert itself to expound the solution and to evaluate the grace; but it does these things best when it recognizes their interdependence, yet without confusing the expressive efficiency of what is engineering with the expressional effectiveness of what is art—the clarity of pure design with the humanity of feeling.

5. *The Composition in Mass*

Now consider the composition as a whole in mass. The trite precept that 'the elevation should express the plan' is all very well as far as it goes. There is an implication here that the organic whole is not independent of the organs composing it. But there are usually, as already noted, good functional grounds for the envelope of a fish, or a boat, or a cottage, or a palace being more than a mere figure made up of the agglomerations of organic

elements; for the exterior or envelope has its own special work to do. 'Should' here really means 'if organic relationships are involved must to some extent'. Broadly speaking, in medieval design there was an artistic interest or enthusiasm for the exposition of the organs, while in Italian Renaissance architecture there was a no less powerful artistic incentive to emphasize the characteristics of the envelope. The impulsive origins of these differences are revealed in the sorts of problems on which medieval and post-Renaissance architects found occasion to exercise their talents. The good critic takes cognizance of the nature of the enveloping form—of the degree to which it is functionally affected by considerations proper to itself. Where a critic weighs the sacrifices of engineering efficiency made in exchange for artistic effectiveness and appraises the latter, he should be listened to with respect. Even when one does not accept the balance of his accounting, it is apt to be illuminating.

As we have seen, the designer becomes artist when he regards the solution of his problem in terms of pure design as just so much raw material for composition—raw material which exercises a considerable control due to its own exigencies, but is yet plastic within limits. The architect does with his solved problem what the sculptor does with his living model—man or beast—he takes such liberties with it as he sees fit in the interest of characterization. It is open to the critic to deal with this manipulation and with the resultant impression; but he is likely to fall into error when he tries to do both at once by explaining content in terms of technique. This usually happens when the critic allows an interest in traditional forms to benumb his analytical powers—a matter on which more will have to be said.

In the manipulation of the raw material of the composition much account is taken of mass, because buildings are seen, and largely felt, as solid, notwithstanding their essential hollowness. Structural masses take the light, accept the shade and cast their shadows, just as if they were solid, thus opening the way to that exploitation of the geometrical characteristics of solid figures, on which architecture depends. The building may be simple or complex, symmetrical or irregular, long, short, tall, or squat, none of which characteristics is intrinsically either good or bad. If the artist makes use of the devices at his command to emphasize such characteristics, it is really nobody's business but his own. But the

critic may properly see fit to comment on how the artist in the case makes use of scale and proportion in his manipulation; while he is doing this the critic is throwing no light on the mood of the thing; often he is obscuring it. An interest in the artistry is to be clearly distinguished from an ability to receive impression. The message in a telegram is lost to him who examines the script.

When the critic devotes himself to the appreciation of the impression of the composition as a whole, no artist can quarrel with him, for he is then entirely within his province. His impression may not be quite that of the artist, or of another critic, or of his reader, but its statement is authentic evidence that he finds something there; and circumstantial evidence that the artist put something there for him to find. This may be vastly helpful in opening the door for those who have not the courage to knock before they seek for themselves.

When Conrad gives his impressions of certain rows of houses in a street in Marseilles he is helping all who read the passage, whether they know that street or not, to understand what architectural impression is, and to realize it for themselves in other streets elsewhere and no matter how different the character or spirit of their architecture may be.

Nor does critical appreciation restrict itself to the spoken and written word. The painter who understands the spirit of a building and makes his graphic comments, as Canaletto, de Hooch, and Sir David Y. Cameron have so often delighted to do, is in precisely the same position as the writer of a critical appreciation who makes his interpretation. Both the writer and the painter, when dealing with a building, may call in the mood of the weather in a subservient capacity, or only make incidental use of the mood of the building; but in so far as they act as interpreters of the mood of the building, both are using the expressional facilities at their disposal in critical appreciation.

Those vehicles of expression which are capable of descriptive employment—notably speech, writing, drawing, and painting (and sculpture in a lesser degree), are to be clearly distinguished from architecture and dancing which are restricted absolutely within their own spheres. One cannot dance the impression of a building, or build the impression of a dance; each has its own field and its own garden. But, to a limited extent, and if one knows how, one may employ linguistic and graphic means to interpret what

primarily subsists in any other modes of expression, whether in their broad fields of what is or might be, or in their tended gardens of the spirit.

How far music is restricted, like architecture and dancing, to its own field and garden has often been argued. Assuredly one cannot interpret architecture in music, the interpretive scope of which is certainly less than that of the linguistic and graphic media. In these the critical appreciation of form finds ready means of expression.

6. *The Elaboration*

It is with respect to the detail and minor parts of buildings that critical interpretation too often goes astray by deriving from such matters a basis for classification and statement as to what other building the building in question looks like, instead of describing how the building looks. When a critic, after scrutiny of the detail, blandly states that a building is in the style of some particular place and period, he is, as observed in an earlier chapter, misusing the word 'style'; but it may readily be granted that both he and his reader or hearer know quite well what he implies. He is then, first of all, assuming that his reader or hearer is cognizant of the practicalities and emotional values of the buildings of the time and place referred to. He is at the same time practically admitting that he cannot, or is too lazy to, put into words what these are. He is also quite likely revealing himself a victim of the fallacy of the artistic categories or classes. This sort of thing is not criticism; for the word 'style' so used is no criterion of value; it is convenient, if at all, in a purely descriptive sense—a good word to do without.

When the critic zealously points out the designer's plagiarisms or remarks on his traditional bias, what does he do? On the positive side, he is stating that the author of the design speaks architectural Greek, Latin, Middle English, Italian, French, or perhaps one of these with the accent of another. This is sometimes interesting, but it does not give enlightenment as to what the designer was architecturally saying, or was feeling when he said it. If the critic describes the 'style' as 'pure', he is just asseverating that the designer displayed erudition. When he adds words of praise, or blame, on account of this purity, the critic is saying something about himself, his views, his taste, his own erudition. This is no

longer appreciation, but mere propaganda—perhaps sincere, probably venal, in any case to be treated with circumspection.

Should the critic see fit to comment on the impurity of the style, he is likely to be far more interesting. If he can point out the 'thousand originalities that are produced by defect of faculty for one produced by genius' he is doing a valuable service to artists and public alike. To maintain the just balance between tradition and innovation, the virtues of the old and new, to save mankind from that kind of originality which is mere ignorant quackery, to reveal that rare kind which comes down with fire from heaven—these are the sacred duties and privileges of the critic. To state that something is like something else, or like several other things, is not criticism, but may be science; and science has its place in relation to the arts. For critical appreciation, science and philosophy are absolutely necessary, but they must be kept in the background; it is fatal when they obtrude. The appreciation, if it is to be effective, must stand on its own foundations without shores and scaffold poles to mar its integrity.

Yet when the critic perceives an incongruity in the design of a building which he can account for as due to a mixture of undigested elements, derived without assimilation from the architectures of widely different periods, he may do well to display his archaeology. The essay in the grand manner contrived out of a row of houses at Murray Gardens, in Edinburgh, has been justly dealt with by a telling three-word blow—'Paestum and window-sashes'. For the writer of these pages it is the Doric colonnade and not the window-sashes that demands amelioration. He does not quarrel with the forceful ponderosity—that was the designer's affair; but he feels that the designer could and should have achieved this without a misapplied quotation, two hundred yards long, in a Greek Colonial dialect.

It is, however, no fault in Norman Shaw's Scotland Yard that his composition comprises windows of types evolved at various times over a period of two hundred and fifty years. It is a great merit that these do occur where each kind is most serviceable. It is an astounding technical achievement that they are all reconciled by their scale and proportionings to take their several places with perfect harmony: this reconciliation is further brought about by the congruity of the detail, which is always firm, clear, rational, and instinct with a bold grace. Consistency with tradition is the

last thing to look for in Shaw's work. Consistency of mood and humour, and a serene, vitally strong spirit, as of energy controlled by gentleness, is written large all over the building to break out exuberantly at last against the sky at the tops of great gables.

The critic does good service when he exploits the real spirit of a design, even where his taste impels him to express his detestation. But the critic who merely explores origins, and stops there, only advertises his inability to realize that design is inevitably evolutionary, and composition consists for the most part in assembling old elements in slightly new ways. The age of the elements is a matter of complete indifference. It is on their being brought and held together that their efficiency to express fact, and still more to convey impression, depends.

7. *The Ornament*

Now when the critic relinquishes his attentions to the fabric as a whole and the elaboration of the fabric and turns to the adornments and decorations of the fabric, he has a double task. The adornments have a certain independence, both in subject and in treatment; but always a measure of dependence on the fabric in both respects. The appreciation of ornament is thus a fourfold affair. It has been already remarked that the ornamentalist has a function essentially different from that of the designer of the fabric, even when they are happily united in one person. When these functions are not so united there is every reason to ascribe to each his due; but jointly. If the designer does not exercise due control on the ornamentalist, the design at least should do so. Otherwise there is no ornament—merely representative expressional activity of some order, high or low. The critic does well when he appraises separately the theme of ornament and decoration, the technical translation of the theme to material, the theme as related to the purpose of the fabric, and lastly the technical handling in relation to the fabric and its parts. Was there ever a more consistently marshalled theme of decorations than that embodied in the sculptures of the Parthenon? Was ever sculptor's art and skill of a higher order requisitioned for adornment? Was it ever so misused as in its application to the cella frieze? And what of the incongruity of the canopy work on the heads of the nave piers at Milan Cathedral and at St. Mary's, Beverley. Exquisite in themselves as all these

things are, viewed as ornament they break down under one or other heading of the critical analysis just recommended.

Above all let the reader of appreciations of ornament beware of the critic who draws analogies with nature. There is neither ornament nor decoration in nature; only functional differentiation of form and colour with occasional resort to materials extraneous to the organism for purposes of camouflage or attractive advertisement. The bower bird is not an ornamentalist notwithstanding his preference for blue and his use of black pigment, nor is the magpie a connoisseur when he selects bright trinkets. The blossom does not adorn the tree, nor do the spots and coloured markings of its petals adorn the blossom. Form and colour in nature are matters of pure design, and therefore expressional, but their place is in the field outside the enclosure that guards the magic garden of art.

Volitional expression on the part of animals is far commoner than is generally supposed; hysteria, the search for sympathy, is not unknown even among the cold-blooded ones; the birds and beasts and fishes evince skill, and delighted skill, in their hunting, their fighting, their building, and their play; but the interchange of emotional experience through 'physical aids' is reserved to man, the animal with tools. Yet not to all men.

The designer, when, in his pride of the thing he has conceived, he causes it to prate of itself, and the ornamentalist, when he enlarges on the relation of the designed object to men in particular and to things in general, are among those, the artists, who offer their wares in this traffic of the heart.

But quite as great in his way is he who with singleness of purpose achieves perfection in pure design—the engineer—brother on the one hand to the gods of creation, and brother on the other to fish that trench the gravel on the redds, to birds that fabricate their nests, and to beasts that turn round and round to make their beds in the long grass. The engineer, without trying to be an artist at all, may be only a little lower than the angels, but is more than a little higher than the beasts.

Skill in pure design is not art. When of a very high order it is sometimes foolishly mistaken for art of a low order. Pure design and art are different things, each to be judged and appreciated by its own standards. Even when the critic does not realize this, those who do, when they listen to him, or read his works, may often derive much benefit from his appreciations of form. His findings

are often valid, even when his argument is fallacious through failure to clearly distinguish between the form that is perfect, or nearly so, as a synthesis of direct purpose, material, and technique, and the form, less perfect, because of an incrustation of forms in which the element of purpose is not direct, but dependent on the main fabric. Such dependent form comes within two categories—architecture and ornament.

The engineer discovers pure form. The architect as engineer also discovers pure form, but then as artist proceeds pridefully to elucidate the fact that he has done so, thus detracting from its purity but adding the elucidation. The ornamentalist superimposes a further elucidation directed, not at the form, but at the thing as part of the apparatus of human life.

In endeavouring to deal fairly by the engineer there should be no regrets in subordinating that part of the architect's work that is not engineering to that part that is such. But the artist, what shall be said of him?—fool, madman, lover, parasitic growth upon the body politic; that has all been said a thousand times; it has been given to Mr. Kipling to say it far better than most on three occasions, but best of all in the verses entitled 'To the True Romance'. To his statement there seems nothing to add.