

BEAUTY LOSES HERSELF<sup>1</sup>

A modern proverb has arisen as a star to guide the erring artist: 'Look after Truth and Goodness, and Beauty will look after herself.' But let the artist beware. Such a star may prove to be a will-o'-the-wisp. At first sight the proverb appears to contain the complete ethic for aesthetics, reducing the tough problem of beauty to a simple and practical formula. How attractive to unite the Good and the True in holy wedlock and then turning discover Beauty the bridesmaid carrying the train behind. Simplifications, however, have their dangers. To bring them in touch with reality requires such care that in practice they become most complex, disclosing many an attractive but misleading view. A simplification should only be the completion of thought, never the commencement. For Mr. Gill this proverb has come as the answer to a long process of reasoning, as appears from this volume. He thus avoids the only serious pitfall. But other artists who begin with this motto may not be so fortunate.

Truth belongs to the mind, goodness to the will, and beauty is the fruit of both the mind and the will. Any being in its perfection will be true in its correspondence to God's idea of it; it will be good in its dependency on God's will; and will be beautiful in its reflection of the harmony of God's mind and will, which have produced the first two effects. Therefore beauty follows necessarily from the truth and goodness of a thing. Concentration on the first and the second produces the third automatically, since it is nothing less than the harmony between those two. 'Beauty is a union of the true and the good, and the faculty which has beauty for its object is the whole and undivided mind. For as the true and the good are united in beauty, so intellect and will must necessarily be united for beauty's discernment and apprehension' (p. 246). So 'look after truth and goodness, and beauty looks after herself.' In ob-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beauty Looks After Herself*. Eric Gill. (Sheed & Ward; 7/6.)

serving the good and the true we must catch the harmony existing between them, just as the man who sees at once the form and the colour of a picture, sees in the same glance the beauty resulting from both. 'Every work of art is made of these two—matter and mind (or spirit)' (p. 19).

This is straightforward enough, but the analysis must be pushed farther. Truth reigns over all relations of mind to its object, goodness over all relations of will to its object. Nevertheless classification is needed according to relation and object. Goodness and truth are of many kinds—natural and supernatural, practical and speculative—and the *quod visum placet* follows the same differentiations. All discussion of an abstraction will be useless without a preliminary word as to the particular sphere in which this abstraction lies. To speak airily of automobiles when one's remarks apply exclusively to the lorry would lead only to confusion.

In the case of this proverb the general principle is true enough. But when the artist discusses it, while thinking of a particular type of beauty, he will be in danger of not so particularizing the other two members of this trinity. Moral truth and moral goodness will beget moral beauty. The saint, looking after supernatural truth and goodness, has a certain supernatural beauty pleasing the inward eye of the observer. By common consent the saint's life is beautiful on account of the harmony of his virtues. A human face has beauty when it is true to a certain ideal of the human face, and good in so far as it is desirable as a human face. We do not expect the saint to emerge with a well proportioned face from the contemplation of the supernaturally true and good. Mr. Gill points out in the last essay that any religion, true or false, is capable of inspiring the artist to create beautiful things.

The artist who, carried away by this enticing proverb, delves into problems of dogmatic theology and attunes his life to the precepts of the gospel, must not thereby expect a boom in his wares as things pleasing to the eye. This, unfortunately, is the tendency, at least in theory. Seizing this formula he will rush off on the way of perfection leaving

his beloved to look after herself. Such action may be commendable, but he must not be disappointed if his works of art do not improve. Apart from the fact that he may be placing the cart before the horse by seeking in spiritual perfection beauty for his productions, he has taken the wrong means for the achievement of artistic beauty. For artistic beauty the artist must look after artistic truth and artistic goodness.

'First he (the artist) must get the idea of the thing to be made clearly in his mind . . . Secondly he must desire to make it . . . Thirdly he must have skill' (p. 182). Art lies largely in the realms of the imagination and the senses, though it has its foundations in the mind. The artist first conceives the work to be produced in his mind and imagination. He then attempts to reproduce that idea in the external world of concrete things. The truth of his art will, therefore, lie in the exactitude of the reproduction of the idea in his material. If this conformity is achieved the work of art will be called true to the artist's idea. The goodness of the art lies in the desirability of the artist's ideas. In looking after the goodness of his art he will therefore concentrate on the nature of that art, true proportion, rhythm, and all those features which make his conceptions desirable. And the truth will be achieved in proportion to his skill in that particular branch. 'Art is in the first place skill.' 'The training of artists, therefore, is twofold. First there is the training of living . . . Secondly, the training of the artist is the training of making things in the actual material of which they are made. . . . The first training—that of living, fills the artist's mind with ideas and images, with things that he comes to know, with things to fall in love with. . . . The second training—that of making things as they are used in the world, will teach him, if for instance he is a sculptor of stone, what stone is actually like, what can and cannot be done in it, what are its special qualities, what it lends or gives itself to best' (pp. 204 and 208). Thus, for the artist, this proverb is reduced to the fact that he must be a skilled craftsman and understand his

## BEAUTY LOSES HERSELF

job. And of course he had been looking after those things long before he heard this miraculous formula, which consequently becomes valueless; unless perchance it leads to a greater specialisation. (*cf.* BLACKFRIARS, June, 1933, p. 460.)

It may be not only valueless, but harmful; for beauty does not suffer alone. The tendency might easily be to seek God and spiritual perfection for an ulterior motive, that of improving one's art. Such an inversion of values, though of course never stated so baldly, would inevitably lead to the ruin of the moral life. All three perfections would sink in the mire of confused ideas.

'A fool may be a saint. A villain may be an artist. A fool may be a villain. A saint may be an artist. But a fool cannot be an artist, nor a villain a saint' (p. 13).

Accidentally, however, some good may come of this notion even when misunderstood. It encourages the artist in the fundamental duty of seeking God and moral perfection. Should he attain some success here in spite of the dangers already pointed out, it should effect an elevation in the beauty of his productions. The higher influences the lower, and moral beauty will have an indirect effect on the artistic. Those who seek God can see all beauty, and 'God is the instigator of all good works' and thus 'the good workman is the man of God, and this is, in an especial manner, true in respect of those works whereof beauty is the formal cause' (p. 249). But let the artist cease looking after goodness, truth and beauty as one looks after three charming travellers disappearing round the corner.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.