**Reflections on a Certain Book**

W. Somerset Maugham

I

PUNCTUALLY at five minutes to five Lampe, his servant, waked Professor Kant and by five, in his slippers, dressing-gown and night-cap, over which he wore his three-cornered hat, he seated himself in his study ready for breakfast. This consisted of a cup of weak tea and a pipe of tobacco. The next two hours he spent thinking over the lecture he was to deliver that morning. Then he dressed. The lecture room was on the ground floor of his house. He lectured from seven till nine and so popular were his lectures that if you wanted a good scat you had to be there by six- thirty. Kant, seated behind a little desk, spoke in a conversational tone, in a low voice, and very rarely indulged in gesture, but he enlivened his discourse with humour and abundant illustrations. His aim was to teach his students to think for themselves and he did not like it when they busied themselves with their quills to write down his every word.

‘Gentlemen, do not scratch so,’ he said once. T am no oracle.’

It was his custom to fix his eyes on a student who sat close to him and judge by the look on his face whether or no he understood what he said. But a very small thing distracted him. On one occasion he lost the thread of his discourse because a button was wanting on the coat of one of the students, and on another when a sleepy youth persistently yawned he broke off to say:

‘If one cannot avoid yawning, good manners require that the hand should be placed before the mouth.’

At nine o’clock Kant returned to his room, once more put on his dressing-gown, his night-cap, his three- cornered hat and his slippers and studied till exactly a quarter to one. Then he called down to his cook, told her the hour, dressed and went back to his study to await the guests he expected to dinner. There were never less than two nor more than five. He could not bear to cat alone and it is related that once when it happened that he had no one to bear him company he told his servant to go out into the street and bring in anyone he could find. He expected his cook to be ready and his guests to arrive punctually. He was in the habit of inviting them on the day he wished them to come so that they might not, to dine with him, be tempted to break a previous engagement; and though a certain Professor Kraus for some time dined with him every day but Sunday he never failed to send him an invitation every morning.

As soon as the guests were assembled Kant told his servant to bring the dinner and himself went to fetch the silver spoons which he kept locked up with his money in a bureau in the parlour. The party seated themselves in the dining-room and with the words: ‘Now, gentlemen,’ Kant set to. The meal was sub­stantial. It was the only one he ate in the day, and consisted of soup, dried pulse with fish, a roast, cheese to end with and fruit when in season. Before each guest was placed a pint bottle of red wine and a pint bottle of white so that he could drink whichever he liked.

Kant was fond of talking, but preferred to talk alone, and if interrupted or contradicted was apt to show displeasure; his conversation, however, was so agreeable that none minded if he monopolised it. In one of his books he wrote: ‘If a young, inexperienced man enters a company (especially when ladies are present) sur­passing in brilliance his expectations, he is easily embarrassed when he is to begin to speak. Now, it would be awkward to begin with an item of news reported in the paper for one does not see what led him to speak of that. But as he has just come from the street, the bad weather is the best introduction to con­versation.’ Though at his own table ladies were never present, Kant made it a rule to start the conversation with this convenient topic; then he turned to the news of the day, home news and foreign, and from this went on to discourse of travellers’ talcs, and peculiarities of foreign peoples, general literature and food. Finally he told humorous stories, of which he had a rich supply and which he told uncommonly well, so, he said, ‘that the repast may end with laughter, which is calculated to promote digestion.’ He liked to linger over dinner and the guests did not rise from table till late. He would not sit down after they had left in case he fell asleep and this he would not permit himself to do since he was of opinion that sleep should be enjoyed sparingly, for thus time was saved and so life lengthened. He set out on his afternoon walk.

He was a little man, barely five feet tall, with a

narrow chest and one shoulder higher than the other, and he was thin almost to emaciation. He had a crooked nose, but a fine brow and his colour was fresh. His eyes, though small, were blue, lively and pene­trating. He was natty in his dress. He wore a small blond wig, a black tic, and a shirt with ruffles round the throat and wrists; a coat, breeches and waistcoat of fine cloth, grey silk stockings and shoes with silver buckles. He carried his three-cornered hat under his arm and in his hand a gold-headed cane. He walked every day, rain or fine, for exactly one hour, but if the weather was threatening, his servant walked behind him with a big umbrella. The only occasion on which he is known to have omitted his walk is when he received Rousseau’s *Emile,* and then, unable to tear himself away from it, he remained indoors for three days. He walked very slowly because he thought it was bad for him to sweat, and alone because he had formed the habit of breathing through his nostrils, since thus he thought to avoid catching cold and, had he had a companion with whom courtesy would oblige him to speak, he would have been constrained to breathe through his mouth. He invariably took the same walk, along the Linden Allee, and this, according to Heine, he strolled up and down eight times. He issued from his house at precisely the same hour, so that the people of the town could set their clocks by it. When he came home he returned to his study and read and wrote letters till the light failed. Then, as was his habit, fixing his eyes on the tower of a neighbouring church, he pondered over the problems that just then occupied him. A story is attached to this: it appears that one evening he noticed that he could no longer see the tower, for some poplars had grown so tall that they hid it. It completely upset him, but fortunately the owners of the poplars consented to cut off their tops so that he could continue to reflect in comfort. At a quarter to ten he suspended his arduous labour and by ten was safely tucked up in bed.

But one day somewhere between the middle and the end of July, in the year 1789, when Kant stepped out of his house to take his afternoon walk, instead of turn­ing towards the Linden Allee he took another direction. The inhabitants of Königsberg were astounded and they said to one another that something must have happened in the world of shattering consequence. They were right. He had just received the news that on the fourteenth of July the Paris mob had stormed the Bastille and released the prisoners. It was the begin­ning of the French Revolution.

Kant was bom in very humble circumstances. His father, a harness maker, was a man of high character, and his mother a deeply religious woman. Of them he said: ‘They gave me a training which in a moral point of view could not have been better, and for which, at every remembrance of them, I am moved with the most grateful emotions.’ He might have gone further and said that the rigid pietism of his mother had no small influence on the system of philosophy he eventually developed. He went to school when he was eight and at sixteen entered the University of Königs­berg. By then his mother was dead. His father was too poor to provide him with more than hoard and lodging, and he got through the six years he spent at the university with some financial help from his uncle, a shoemaker, by taking pupils and, unexpectedly enough, by making a certain amount of money through his skill at billiards and at the card game of ombre. When his father died, Kant being then twenty- two, the home, such as it was, broke up. Of the eleven children Frau Kant had borne her husband, five remained alive: the immediate subject of this narrative, a much younger brother and three girls. The girls went into domestic service and two of them eventually married in their own class of life. The boy was taken care of by his uncle, the shoemaker, and Kant, having failed in his application for an assistant’s place at a local school, got a succession of jobs as tutor in the families of the provincial gentry. It was by mixing in a society more polite than that in which he was born and brought up that he acquired the good manners and the social grace for which he was afterwards distin­guished. He spent nine years thus occupied, and then, having taken his degree, started upon his career as a lecturer at Königsberg. He lived in lodgings and took his meals at eating-houses which he selected on the chance of meeting agreeable company. But he was pernickety. In one of the lodging-houses he was dis­turbed in his meditations by the crowing of a cock, and though he tried to buy it the owner would not sell and so he had to move elsewhere. He left one eating-house because a fellow guest talked boringly and another because he found himself expected to hold forth on learned subjects, which was the very thing he did not want to do. It was not till after many years that he was well enough off to have a house of his own and a servant to look after him. The house was sparsely furnished and the only picture in it was a portrait of Rousseau which had been given him by a friend. The walls had been whitewashed, but in time had grown so black from smoke and soot that you could write your name on them; when, however, a visitor once proceeded to do something like this, Kant mildly rebuked him.

‘Friend, why will you disturb the ancient rust?’ he asked. ‘Is not such a hanging, which arose of its own accord, better than one which is purchased?’

Though he lived to be eighty, he never went more than sixty miles away from the town in which he was born. He suffered from frequent indispositions and was seldom free from pain, but he was able by the exertion of his will to turn his attention away from his feelings just as though they did not concern him. ‘He was accustomed to say that one should know how to adapt oneself to one’s body.’ He was of a cheerful disposition, amiable to all, and considerate; but he was punctilious. He expected the same deference to be paid to him as he paid to others. So when his celebrity made people eager to meet him and a common acquaintance tried to arrange that they should do so by inviting him to his own house he would not consent to go till, however distinguished they were, they had paid him a visit of courtesy.

II

I have given this brief account of what sort of a man Kant was, and what sort of life he led, in the hope of sufficiently whetting the readers’ interest in this great philosopher to induce him to have patience with me while I submit to him the reflections that have occurred to me during the reading of a book of his with the some­what forbidding title of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment.* It deals with two subjects, æsthetics and teleology, but I hasten to add that it is only with the first of these, æsthetics, that I propose to concern myself; and that only with diffidence, for I am well aware that it may be thought presumptuous in a writer of fiction to concern himself with such a matter. I do not pretend to be a philosopher, but merely a man who has throughout his life been profoundly interested in art. All I venture to claim is that I know from experi­ence something of the process of creation and as a writer of fiction can look upon the question of beauty, which is of course the subject matter of æsthetics, with impartiality. Fiction is an art, but an imperfect one. The great novels of the world may deal with all the passions to which man is subject, discover the depths of his variable and disconsolate soul, analyse human relations, describe a civilisation or create immortal characters; it is only by a misuse of the word that beauty can be ascribed to them. We writers of fiction must leave beauty to the poets.

But before I begin to speak of Kant’s æsthetic ideas I must tell the reader one very odd thing: he appears to have been entirely devoid of æsthetic sensibility. One of his biographers writes as follows: ‘He never seemed to pay much attention to paintings and engravings, even of a superior kind. In galleries and rooms con­taining much admired and highly praised collections, I never noticed that he specially directed his attention to the pictures, or in any way gave evidence of his appreciation of the artist’s skill.’ He was not what was called in the eighteenth century a man of feeling. Twice he thought seriously of marrying, but he took so long to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the step he had in mind that in the interval one of the young women he had his eye on married somebody else and the other left Königsberg before he reached a decision. I think this argues that he was not in love, for when you are, even if you are a philosopher, you have no difficulty in finding very good reasons for doing what your inclinations prompt. His two married sisters lived in Königsberg. Kant never spoke to them for twenty-five years. The reason he gave for this was that he had nothing to say to them. This seems sensible enough, and though we may deplore his lack of heart, when we remember how often our pusillanimity has led us to rack our brains in the effort to make con­versation with persons with whom we have nothing in common but a tie of blood, we cannot but admire his strength of mind. He had intimate acquaintances rather than friends. When they were ill, he did not care to go to see diem, but sent every day to enquire after them, and when they died he put them out of his mind with the words: ‘Let the dead rest with the dead.’ He was neither impulsive nor demonstrative, but he was kindly, within his scanty means generous, and obliging. His intelligence was great, his power of reasoning impressive, but his emotional nature was meagre.

It is all the more remarkable then that, writing on a subject which depends on feeling, he should have said so much that was wise and even profound. He saw, of course, that beauty does not reside in the object. It is the name we give to the specific feeling of pleasure which the object gives us. He saw also that art can give beauty to tilings which are in nature ugly or dis­pleasing, but he made the reservation, which certain modem painters might well bear in mind, that some things may be so ugly in their representation as to excite disgust. And in suggesting that when experience proves too commonplace the artist by means of his imagination may work up the material he borrows from nature into something that surpasses nature, Kant may almost be supposed to have foreseen the non-representational art of our own day.

Now, the ideas of a philosopher are largely con­ditioned by his personal characteristics, and, as one might have expected, Kant’s approach to the problems of æsthetics is rigidly intellectual. His aim is to prove that the delight we take in beauty is one of mere reflection. It is interesting to see how he sets about doing this. He starts by making a distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful. The pleasure which the beautiful occasions is independent of all interest. The agreeable is what the senses find pleasing in sensation. The agreeable arouses inclination, and inclination is bound up with desire, and so with interest. A trivial illustration may make Kant’s point clear: when I look at the Doric temples at Pæstum the pleasure they afford me is quite obviously independent of all interest and so I may safely call them beautiful; but when I look at a ripe peach the pleasure it causes me is not disinterested, for it excites in me a desire to eat it and therefore I am bound to call it no more than agree­able. The senses of men differ and what causes me pleasure may leave you indifferent. Each of us may judge the agreeable according to his own taste and there is no disputing that. The satisfaction it gives is mere enjoyment, and so, states Kant, has no worth. That is a hard saying, which, I think, can only be explained by his conviction that the faculties of the mind alone have real value. But now, since beauty has no connection with sensation (which is bound up with interest) colour, charm and emotion, which arc mere matters of sensation and so only cause enjoyment, have nothing to do with it. This of course is rather startling, but why Kant makes a statement at first sight so outrageous is plain. Since the senses of men differ, if the beautiful depends on the senses your judgment and mine are as good as that of anybody else, and æsthetics will not exist. If a judgment of taste, or what, I think, we would now more conveniently call apprecia­tion of the beautiful, is to have any validity it must depend not on anything so capricious as feeling, but on a mental process. When you come to consider an object with a view to deciding its aesthetic value, you must discard everything, its colour, such charm as it has, the emotion it excites in you, and attend only to its form; and if then you become aware of a harmony between your imagination and your understanding (both faculties of the mind) you will receive a sensation of pleasure and be justified in calling the object beautiful.

But then, having performed this singular operation, you may demand that everyone else should agree with you. The judgment that a thing is beautiful, though a subjective judgment since it is based not on a concept, but on the feeling of pleasure it arouses, has universal validity, and you have the right to claim that everyone *ought* to find beautiful what you find beautiful. In fact it is in a way the duty of others to fall in with your judgment. Kant justifies this contention thus: ‘For where anyone is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men. For, since the delight is not based on any inclination of the subject (or on any other deliberate interest), but the subject feels himself completely free in respect of the liking which he accords to the object, he can find as the reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore he must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from everyone.’

Yet it looks as though Kant had an inkling that this was rather thin. It may even have occurred to him that the imagination and the understanding were in no better case than the senses, for it is obvious that these two faculties of the mind are not the same in all men. There must have been many people in Königsberg who had more imagination than our philosopher, but none who had so solid an understanding. Kant is forced to presuppose that we can only exact from others agreement with our estimate of what is beautiful by a sense common to all men. But since he admits almost in the same breath that people are often mistaken in judging that an object is beautiful it does not seem to get us much further. And in another place he remarks that an interest in the beautiful is not common: one would have thought that if there were a sense common to all men, all men should be interested in the beautiful. Indeed in the section of his treatise called *Dialectic of Æsthetic Judgment* he states that the only means of saving the claim of the judgment of taste, that is the appreciation of beauty, to universal validity is by supposing a concept of the supersensible lying at the basis of the object and of the judging subject; if I under­stand aright he means by this that the object of beauty and the person who considers it are both appearances of reality, and reality is one. They are, as it were, a coat and a pair of trousers made out of a bolt of the same fabric. I find this unconvincing. The assumption that in the appreciation of beauty there is a sense common to all men looks to me like nothing more than a futile attempt to prove something that all experience refutes. If the pleasure that is afforded by a beautiful object is subjective, and that of course Kant insists upon, it must depend on the idiosyncrasies of the observer, idiosyncrasies of the mind as well as idiosyn­crasies of the senses; and though we, inheritors of Hebraic, Greek and Roman civilisation, have many traits in common we arc none of us alike as two peas. Though we may agree more or less on the beauty of certain familiar things, and then perhaps only because they are familiar, it is only natural that our judgments of the beautiful should be as diverse as those of the agreeable admittedly are.

Kant then claimed that when you have decided that an object is beautiful by the process I have just des­cribed, you can not only impute the pleasure (a feoling) you experience to everyone else, but also suppose that your pleasure (a feeling, I repeat) is universally com­municable. This seems very strange. I should have thought the peculiarity of feeling is that it is not communicable. If I am looking at Giorgione’s *Virgin Enthroned* at Castel Franco, I can, if I have any gift of expression, *tell* you what I feel about it, but I cannot make you *feel* my feeling. I can tell you I am in love; I can even describe the feelings that my love excites in me; but I cannot communicate my love, a feeling, to you. If I could you would be in love with the object of my affections, and that might be highly embarrass­ing to me. Our feelings are surely conditioned by our dispositions. So much is this so that I do not think it an exaggeration to say that no two persons sec exactly the same picture or read exactly the same poem. I can only suppose that Kant came by this notion of the universal communicability of feeling owing to his con­viction that feeling was negligible except in so far as by means of the imagination and the understanding it gave rise to ideas; and since ideas by the nature of our cognitive faculties *are* universally communicable, the feeling that occasioned them must be so too. He was not, as I ventured at the beginning of this essay to point out, a man who felt with intensity. That may, perhaps, be the reason why he insisted that the apprecia­tion of beauty is merely contemplative.

But contemplation is a passive state. It does not suggest the thrill, the excitement, the breathlessness, the agitation with which the sight of a beautiful picture, the reading of a beautiful poem, must affect a person of æsthetic sensibility. It may well describe his reaction to the agreeable, but surely not to the beautiful. It is difficult for me to believe that any such person can read certain passages of Shakespeare or Milton, listen to certain pieces by Mozart or Beethoven, see certain pictures by El Greco or Chardin with so tepid a feeling that it can be justly called contemplation.

III

Kant’s doctrine of the communicability of feeling leads not unnaturally to a consideration of the question of communication. It is obvious that the artist, be he poet, painter or composer, makes a communication, but from this the writers on æsthetics infer that this is his intention. There I think they are mistaken. They have not sufficiently examined the process of creation. I don’t believe the artist who sets to work to create a work of art has any such purpose as they ascribe to him. If he has he is a didactic or a propagandist, and as such not an artist. I know what happens to a writer of fiction. An idea comes to him, he knows not whence, and so he gives it the rather grand name of inspiration. It is as slight a thing as the tiny foreign body that finds its way into the oyster’s shell and so creates the disturbance that will result in the creation of a pearl. For some reason the idea excites him, his imagination goes to work, out of his unconscious arise thoughts and feelings, characters crowd upon him and events suggest themselves that will express them, for character is expressed by action, not by description, till at length he is possessed of a shapeless mass of material. This sometimes, but not always, falls into a pattern that enables him to see a path, as it were, which he can follow through the jungle of this confused medley of feelings and ideas till he is so obsessed by the muddle of it that to liberate his soul from a burden that has grown intolerable he is constrained to put it all down on paper. Having done this he regains his freedom. What communication the reader gets from it is not his affair.

So it is, I surmise, with the landscape painter, the young Monet for instance or Pissarro; he cannot tell you why some scene, the bend of a river, say, or a road under the snow, bordered by leafless trees, gives him a peculiar thrill so that the creative instinct is stirred in him and he has the feeling that here is something that he can deal with, and because nature has made him a painter he is able to transmute his emotion into an arrangement of colour and form that does not satisfy his sensibility, for I think it doubtful whether the artist, whatever art he practises, ever achieves the full result he saw in his mind’s eye, yet allays the urge of creation which is at once his delight and his torment. But I do not believe it has ever entered his head that he was making a communication to the persons who after­wards see his picture.

So it is, I submit, with the poet and the composer of music, and if I have spoken of painting rather than of poetry or music it is, frankly, because it is not so difficult to deal with. A picture can be seen at once.

Not that I mean a glance will give you all that it has to give. That you can get, if you get it at all, only by giving it your continued and renewed attention. Poetry deals with words and words have overwhelming associa­tions, associations different in different countries and in different cultures. Words affect by their meaning as well as by their sound, and so are addressed to the mind as well as to the sensibility. The only meaning of a picture is the æsthetic delight it gives you. In any case I would not venture to speak of music; the peculiar gift which enables someone to invent it is to me the most mysterious of the processes which produce a work of art. One is taken aback at first to find that Kant placed music (along with cooking) among the inferior arts because, though perhaps the highest among the arts which are valued for their agreeableness, it merely plays with sensation. It was natural that he should do this since he estimated the worth of the arts by the culture they supply to the mind. He has, however, a good word to say of poetry because it gives the imagina­tion an impetus to bring more thought into play than allows of being brought into the embrace of a concept, or therefore being definitely formulated in language; but ‘among the formative arts,’ he writes, ‘I would give the palm to painting because it can penetrate much further into the region of ideas.’

IV

And now, since this does not pretend to be a philoso­phical dissertation, but merely a discourse on a subject that happens to interest me, I propose to permit myself a digression. The intellectual attitude towards aesthetic appreciation is that of pretty well all the writers on aesthetics. This is perhaps inevitable, for they are compelled to reason about what has little or nothing to do with reason, but almost only with feeling. It was certainly the attitude of Roger Fry. He was a charming man, a lucid write and an indifferent painter. He rightly earned a high reputation as a critic of art, but, as all but few of us are, he was swayed by certain prejudices of his time. He claimed that a work of art should be conceived in response to a free aesthetic impulse and so condemned the patron unless he allowed the artist to go his own way regardless of the patron’s wishes. He had little patience with portraiture because, according to him, people have their portraits painted for social prestige or for purposes of publicity. He regarded the painters who accept such commissions as useless, probably mischievous, parasites upon society. He divided works of art into two distinct classes—‘one in which for some reason the artist can express his genuine æsthetic impulse, the other in which the artist uses his technical skill to gratify a public incapable of responding to æsthetic appeal.’ This seems very high­handed. Because the Pharaons had colossal statues made of themselves presumably with the same intention as Mussolini and Hitler had when they plastered walls with portraits of themselves, namely to impress them­selves on the imagination of their subjects, there are Bellini’s Doge, Titian’s *Man with a Glove,* Velasquez’ Pope Innocent, to prove that a portrait can be a work of art and a thing of beauty. We can only suppose that they satisfied their patrons. It is unlikely that had Philip IV been displeased with the portraits Velasquez painted of him, he would have sat to him so often.

The flaw in Roger Fry’s argument lies in the pre­sumption that the motives which have led the artist to create a work of art are any business of the critic’s or of the layman’s. He may, if he is a novelist, start writing a novel to ridicule another novelist, as Fielding started to write *Joseph Andrews* to mock at Richardson, and then, the creative instinct moving him, go on writing for his own enjoyment. Dickens, as we know, was asked to write a book on a subject which did not appeal to him to serve as letterpress for the illustrations of a popular draughtsman and he accepted the com­mission only because he needed the fourteen pounds a month he was offered for the work. Since he had immense vitality, an exuberant sense of the comic, the power of creating characters as alive as they were fantastic, he produced in *The Pickwick Papers* the greatest work of humour in the English language. It may well be that it was the irksome conditions that he felt bound to accept wliich gave rise to the flash of genius by means of which, without rhyme or reason, out of the blue, came Sam Weller and Sam Weller’s father. It is news to me that the artist who knows his business is hampered by the limitations that are imposed upon him. When the donor of an altarpiece wanted portraits of himself and his wife kneeling at the foot of the Cross with Christ Crucified, perhaps for publicity or for social prestige, but perhaps also because his piety was sincere, in either case the painter had no difficulty in complying with his patron’s wish. I cannot believe that it ever entered his head that he looked upon this as an infringement of his aesthetic freedom: on the contrary I am more inclined to believe that the difficulty he was asked to cope with excited and inspired him. Every art has its limitations and the better the artist the more comfortably does he exercise his creative instincts within them.

A generation or two ago a claim was made that painting was an esoteric business that only painters could adequately appreciate since they alone knew its technique. This claim, probably first made in France, where during the last hundred years most æsthetic ideas have arisen, was launched in England, I believe, by Whistler. He asserted that the layman was by his nature a Philistine, and his duty was to accept what the artist oracularly told him. His only function was to buy the painter’s picture in order to provide him with bread and butter, but his appreciation was as imperti­nent as his censure. That was a farrago of nonsense. There is nothing mystical about technique; it is merely the name given to the processes by means of which the artist achieves the effects he aims at. Every art has its technique. It has nothing to do with the layman. He is only concerned with the result. When you look at a picture, if you are of a curious turn of mind it may interest you to examine the way in which the painter has achieved integration through relations of colour, light, line and space; but that is not the æsthetic com­munication which it has to give you. You do not look at a picture only with your eyes, you look at it with your experience of life, your instinctive likes and dis­likes, your habits and feelings, your associations, in fact with the whole of your personality. And the richer your personality the richer is the communication the picture has to give you. The notion, foolish to my mind, that painting is a mystery accessible only to the initiated, is flattering to the painters. It has led them to be scornful of the writers on art who see in pictures what from their professional standpoint is of no interest. I think they are wrong. Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is not a picture that everyone can care for now, but we know the communication it had to make to Walter Pater; it was not a purely æsthetic communication, but it is surely not the least of this particular picture’s merits that it had it to make to a man of peculiar sensibility.

There is a painting by Degas in the Louvre which is popularly known as *L’Absinthe,* but in fact represents an engraver well-known in his day and an actress called Ellen André. There is no reason to suppose that they were more disreputable than other persons of their calling. They are seated side by side at a marble- topped table in a shabby *bistro.* The surroundings are sordid and vulgar. A glass of absinthe stands before the actress. Their dress is slovenly and you can almost smell the stench of their unwashed bodies and grubby clothes. They are slumped down on the *banquette* in an alcoholic stupor. Their faces are heavy and sullen. There is an air of apathetic hopelessness in their listless attitude and you would say that they were dully resigned to sink deeper and deeper into shameless degradation. It is not a pretty picture, nor a pleasing one, and yet it is surely one of the great pictures of the world. It offers the authentic thrill of beauty. Of course I can see how admirable the composition is, how pleasing the colour and how solid the drawing, but to me there is much more in it than that. As I stand before it, my sensibilities quickened, at the back of my mind, somewhere between the conscious and the subconscious, I become aware of Verlaine’s poems, and of Rimbaud’s, of *Manette Salomon,* of the *quais* along the Seine with their second-hand book-stalls, of the Boulevard St. Michel and the cafés and *bistros* in old mean streets. I dare say that from the stand­point of aesthetic appreciation, which should be occupied only with aesthetic values, this is repre­hensible. Why should I care? My delight in the picture is enormously increased. Is it possible that a picture which gives one so much can have been painted, as the distinguished critic, Camille Mauclair, says it was, because Degas was fascinated by the para­doxical perspective of the marble-topped tables in the foreground?

But now I must break off to make a confession to the reader. I have glibly used the word *Beauty* as though I knew just what it meant. I’m not at all sure that I do. It obviously means something, but exactly what? When we say that something is beautiful can we really say why we say it? Do we mean anything more than that it happens to give us a peculiar feeling? I have noticed that the word has bothered the writers on aesthetics not a little; some indeed have sought to avoid it altogether. Some have claimed that it resides in harmony, symmetry and formal relations. Others have identified it with truth and goodness; others again have held that it is merely that which is pleasant. Kant has given several definitions of it, but they all tend to substantiate his claim that the pleasure which beauty affords us is a pleasure of reflection. For all I have been able to discover to the contrary he seems to have believed that beauty was immutable, a belief, I think, generally shared by the writers on aesthetics. Keats expressed the same idea in the first line of *Endymion:* ‘A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.’ By this he may have meant one of two things: one, that so long as an object retains its beauty it is a pleasure; but that is what I believe philosophers call an analytical proposition, and tells us nothing that we didn’t know before, since the characteristic of beauty is that it affords pleasure. Keats was too intelligent to make a statement so trite and I can only think he meant that a thing of beauty is a joy for ever because it retains its beauty for ever. And there he was wrong. For beauty is as transitory as all other things in this world. Some­times it has a long life, as Greek sculpture has had owing to the prestige of Greek culture and owing to its repre­sentations of the human form which have provided us with an ideal of human beauty; but even Greek sculpture, owing to the acquaintance we have now made with Chinese and Negro art, has with the artists themselves lost much of its appeal. It is no longer a source of inspiration. Its beauty is dying. An indication of this may be seen in the movies. Directors no longer choose their heroes as they did twenty years ago for their classical beauty, but for their expression and such evidence as their outward seeming offers of character and personality. They would not do this unless they had discovered that classical beauty had lost its allure. Sometimes the life of beauty is short. We can all remember pictures and poems which gave us the authentic thrill of beauty in our youth, but from which beauty has now seeped out as water seeps out of a porous jar. Beauty depends on the climate of sensi­bility and this changes with the passing years. A different generation has different needs and demands a different satisfaction. We grow tired of something we know too well and ask for something new. The eighteenth century saw nothing in the paintings of the Italian Primitives but the fumblings of immature, unskilful artists. Were those pictures beautiful then? No. It is wc who have given them their beauty and it is likely enough that the qualities we find in them are not the qualities which appealed to the lovers of art, long since dead, who saw them when they were first painted. Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his *Second Discourse,* recommended Ludovic» Caracci as a model for style in painting, in which he thought he approached the nearest to perfection. ‘His unaffected breadth of light and shadow,’ he said, ‘the simplicity of colouring, which, holding its proper rank, does not draw aside the least part of the attention from the subject, and the solemn effect of that twilight which seems diffused over his pictures, appear to me to correspond with grave and dignified subjects, better than the more artificial brilliancy of sunshine which enlightens the pictures of Titian.’ Hazlitt was a great critic and enough of a painter to paint a tolerable portrait of Charles Lamb. Of Correggio he wrote that he ‘possessed a greater variety of excellence in the different departments of his art than any other painter.’ ‘Who can think of him,’ he asks rhetorically, ‘without a swimming of the head?’ We can. Hazlitt considered Guercino’s *Endymion* one of the finest pictures in Florence. I doubt whether anyone today would give it more than a passing glance. Now, it is no good saying that these eminent persons didn’t know what they were talking about; they expressed the cultivated æsthetic opinions of their time. Beauty in fact is only that which produces the specific pleasure which leads us to describe an object as beautiful during a certain period of the world’s history, and it does so because it responds to certain needs of the period. It would be foolish to suppose that our opinions are any more definitive than those of our fathers, and we may be pretty sure that our descendants will look upon them with the same perplexity as we look upon Sir Joshua’s high praise of Pellegrino Tibaldi and Hazlitt’s passionate admira­tion for Guido Reni.

V

I have suggested that there is between the creation of beauty and the appreciation of it a disjunction which no bridge can span, and from what I have said the reader will have gathered that I think the appreciation is enhanced by, if not actually dependent upon, the culture of the individual. That is what the connoisseurs of art and the lovers of beauty claim, and they claim also that the gift of æsthetic appreciation is a rare one. If they are right it demolishes Tolstoi’s contention that real beauty is accessible to everyone. Perhaps the most interesting part of Kant’s *Critique of Æsthetic Judgment* is the long section he devotes to the sublime. I need only trouble the reader with his conclusions. He points out that the peasant who lives among mountains merely looks upon them as horrible and dangerous (as we know the ancient travellers did) and the sea-faring man looks upon the sea as a treacherous and uncertain element which it is his business to contend with. To receive from the snow-clad mountains and the storm- tossed sea the specific pleasure which we call the sublime demands a susceptibility to ideas and a certain degree of culture. That has an air of truth. Is the farmer conscious of the beauty of the landscape in the sight of which he earns his daily bread? I should say not; and that is natural, for the appreciation of beauty, it is agreed, must not be affected by practical con­siderations, and he is concerned to plough a field or to dig a ditch. The appreciation of the beauty of nature is a recent acquisition of the human race. It was created by the painters and writers of the Romantic Era. It needs leisure and sophistication. In order to appreciate it, then, not only disinterestedness is needed, but culture and a susceptibility to ideas. Unwelcome as the idea may be, I don’t see how one can escape admitting that beauty is accessible but to the chosen few.

But to admit that excites in me a feeling of deep discomfort. More than twenty-five years ago I bought an abstract picture by Fernand Léger. It was an arrangement of squares, oblongs and spheres in black, white, grey and red, and for some reason he had called it *Les Toits de Paris.* I did not think it beautiful, but I found it ingenious and decorative. *I* had a cook then, a bad-tempered and quarrelsome woman, who would stand looking at this picture for quite long periods in a state of something that looked very like rapture. I asked her what she saw in it. ‘I don’t know,’ she answered, *‘mais ça me plait, ça me dit quelque chose.’* It seemed to me that she was receiving as genuine an aesthetic emotion as I flattered myself I received from El Greco’s *Crucifixion,* in the Louvre. I am led by this (a single instance, of course) to suggest that it is a very narrow point of view which claims that the specific pleasure of artistic appreciation can only be felt by the privileged few. It may well be that the pleasure is subtler, richer and more discriminating in someone whose personality is cultivated, whose experi­ence is wide, but why should we suppose that someone else, less fortunately circumstanced, cannot feel a pleasure as intense and as fruitful? The object that in the latter gives rise to the pleasure may be what the aesthete considers no great shakes. Does that matter? It appears that the urn which inspired Keats to write his great ode was a mediocre piece of Greco-Roman sculpture, yet it gave him the aesthetic thrill which, being what he was, occasioned one of the most beautiful poems in the English language. Kant put the matter succinctly when he said that beauty does not reside in the object. It is the name we give to the specific pleasure which the object gives us. Pleasure is a feeling.

I can see no reason why there should not be as many people capable of enjoying the specific pleasure of beauty as there are who are capable of feeling grief or joy, love, tenderness and compassion. I am inclined to say that Tolstoi was right when he said that real beauty is accessible to everyone if you leave out the word *real.* There is no such thing as real beauty. Beauty is what gives you and me and everyone else that sense of exultation and liberation which I have already spoken of. But in discourse it is more con­venient to use the word as if it were a material entity, like a chair or a table, existing in its own right, indepen­dent of the observer, and that I shall continue to do.

VI

Now, after this long digression from my subject, which is Kant’s aesthetic ideas, I must attempt to cope with what I have found the most difficult part of his treatise, and that is his discussion of purposiveness and purpose in relation to beauty'. And what makes it more difficult is that he seems sometimes to use the two words as though they were synonymous. (The German words arc *Zweck* and *Zweckmässigkeit.)* In this essay, designed to interest the general reader, I have been at pains to avoid the technical terms of philosophy, but now I must ask his indulgence while I give him Kant’s definition of purpose and purposiveness. It runs as follows: ‘Purpose is the object of a concept in so far as this concept is regarded as the cause of the object, that is to say as the real ground of its possibility. The causality of a concept in respect of its object is its purposiveness.’ Kant gives an illustration which makes the matter clear: A man builds a house in order to rent it. That is his purpose in building it. But the house would not have been built at all unless he had conceived the idea that he would receive rent from it. This concept is the purposiveness of building the house. There is a certain humour, probably uncon­scious, in one example which our philosopher gives of purposiveness in nature: ‘The vermin that torment men in their clothes, their hair, or their bed may be according to a wise appointment of nature a motive of cleanliness which is in itself an important means for the preservation of health.’ But that these vermin have been created for this purpose cannot be a conviction, but at most a persuasion. It may be no more than a wholesome illusion. The purposiveness which we seem to find in nature may be occasioned only by the peculiar constitution of our cognitive faculties. It is a principle we make use of to provide ourselves with concepts in the vast multiplicity of nature, so that we may take our bearings in it and enable our understanding to feel itself at home in it.

Fortunately for myself I am only concerned with this principle in so far as it is related to Kant’s æsthetic ideas. Beauty, he states, is the form of purposiveness in an object so far as it is perceived in it apart from the representation of a purpose. This purposiveness, however, is not real; we are forced by the subjective needs of our nature to ascribe it to the object which we call beautiful. Since I am more at ease with the concrete than with the abstract I have tried to think of an object of beauty which has purposiveness apart from purpose, and that is not so easy since the simplest definition of purposiveness is that it is characterised by purpose. I offer an illustration with diffidence. A rice bowl of the Yung Lo period, of the porcelain known as egg­shell, is so wafer-thin, so fragile, so delicate in texture that its purpose is evidently not to contain rice. Such a purpose would be of practical interest and the appreciation of beauty is essentially disinterested. Furthermore, there is an admirably drawn design under the glaze which can only be seen when you hold the bowl, empty, up to the light. What other purposive­ness can it have but to please the eye? But if by the purposiveness of an object of beauty Kant had merely meant that it affords pleasure he would surely have said so. I have an inkling that at the back of his great mind was a disinclination to admit that pleasure was the only effect to be obtained from the considera­tion of a great work of art.

Pleasure has always had a bad name. Philosophers and moralists have been unwilling to own that it is good and only to be eschewed when its consequences are harmful. Plato, as we know, condemned art unless it led to right action. Christianity with its contempt of the body and its obsession with sin viewed pleasure with apprehension and its pursuit unworthy of a human being with an immortal soul. I suppose that the dis­approval with which pleasure is regarded arises from the fact that when people think of it, it is in con­nection with the pleasures of the body. That is not fair. There are spiritual pleasures as well as physical pleasures, and if we must allow that sexual intercourse, as St. Augustine (who knew something about it) declared, is the greatest of physical pleasures, we may admit that aesthetic appreciation is the greatest of spiritual pleasures.

Kant says that the artist produces a work of art with no other purpose than to make it beautiful. I do not believe that is so; I believe that the artist produces a work of art to exercise his creative faculty, and whether what he creates is beautiful is a fortuitous result in which he may well be uninterested. We know from Vasari that Titian was a fashionable and prolific portrait painter. His experience was wide and he knew his business, so that when he came to paint the *Man with a Glove* it is probable enough that he was concerned only to get a good likeness and satisfy his client It was a happy accident that, owing to his own great gifts and the natural grace of his sitter, he achieved beauty. Milton has concisely told us what his purpose was in writing *Paradise Lost,* it was a didactic purpose, and if in passage after passage he achieved beauty I cannot but think that this too was a happy accident. It may be that beauty, like happiness and originality, is more likely to be obtained when it is not deliberately attempted.

I have not thought it necessary in this discourse to touch upon Kant’s discussion of the sublime, though, as he insists, our judgments about the beautiful and the sublime are akin, since both are aesthetic judgments. The purposiveness we are obliged to ascribe to both (unfortunately Kant docs not tell us why) is entirely subjective. ‘We call things sublime’, he says, ‘on the ground that they make us feel the sublimity of our own minds.’ Our imagination cannot cope with the feeling that arises in us when we contemplate the raging, storm-tossed sea and the massed immensities of the Himalayas, with their eternal snows. We are made to feel our insignificance, but at the same time we are exalted, since, awe-struck as we may be, we are conscious that we are not limited to the world of sense, but can raise ourselves above it. ‘Nature may deprive us of everything, but it has no power over our moral personality.’ So Pascal said: “*L’homme n’est qu’un roseau, le plus foible de la nature, mais c’est un roseau pensant, il ne faut pas que l’Univers entier s’arme pour l’écraser, une vapeur, une goutte d’eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l’Univers l’écraserait, l’homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue, parce qu’il scait qu'il meurt et l’avantage que l’Univers a sur lui, L’Univers n’en scait rien.”* If Kant had had the æsthetic sensibility which, as I remarked early in this essay, he seems singularly to have lacked, it might perhaps have occurred to him that the emotions we feel, and the ideas that spring from them, when we contemplate a supreme work of art, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or El Greco’s *Crucifixion* in the Louvre, are not so very different from those we have when we are confronted with the objects we describe as sublime. They are moral emotions and moral ideas.

Kant, as we know, was a moralist. ‘Reason,’ he says, ‘can never be persuaded that the existence of a man who merely lives for enjoyment has worth in itself.’ That we may all agree to. Then he says: ‘If the beautiful arts are not brought into more or less combination with moral ideas . . . they serve only as a distraction, of which we are the more in need the more we avail ourselves of them to disperse the discontent of the mind with itself, so that we render ourselves ever more useless and more discontented.’ He goes even further when at the very end of his treatise he says that the true introduction to the appreciation of beauty is the development of the moral ideas and the culture of moral feeling. It is not for me who am no philosopher to suggest that by his difficult proposition that beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object so far as this is perceived without any presentation of a purpose, Kant may have meant something other than what he said, but, I must confess, it seems to me that if the purposiveness which we are apparently forced to ascribe to the work of art lies only in the artist’s intention these scattered observations of his are some­what pointless; for what has the artist’s intention to do with us? We, I repeat, arc only concerned with what he has done.

Jeremy Bentham startled the world many years ago by stating in effect that if the amount of pleasure obtained from each be equal there is nothing to choose between poetry and push-pin. Since few people now know what push-pin is, I may explain that it is a child’s game in which one player tries to push his pin across that of another player, and if he succeeds and then is able by pressing down on the two pins with the ball of his thumb to lift them off the table he wins possession of his opponent’s pin. When I was a small boy at a preparatory school we used to play it with steel nibs till the headmaster discovered that we had somehow turned it into a gambling game, whereupon he forbade us to play it, and when he caught us still doing so, soundly beat us. The indignant retort to Bentham’s statement was that spiritual pleasures are obviously higher than physical pleasures. But who say so? Those who prefer spiritual pleasures. They are in a miserable minority, as they acknowledge when they declare that the gift of aesthetic appreciation is a very rare one. The vast majority of men are, as we know, both by necessity and choice preoccupied with material considerations. Their pleasures are material. They look askance at those who spend their lives in the pursuit of art. That is why they have attached a depreciatory sense to the word æsthete, which means merely one who has a special appreciation of beauty. How are we going to show that they are wrong? How are we going to show that there *is* something to choose between poetry and push-pin? I surmise that Bentham chose push-pin for its pleasant alliteration with poetry. Let us speak of lawn tennis. It is a popular game which many of us can play with pleasure. It needs skill and judgment, a good eye and a cool head. If I get the same amount of pleasure out of playing it as you get by looking at Titian’s *Entombment of Christ* in the Louvre, by listening to Beethoven’s *Eroica* or by reading Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday,* how are you going to prove that your pleasure is better and more refined than mine? Only, I should say, by manifesting that this gift you have of aesthetic appreciation has a moral effect on your character.

In one place Kant makes the significant remark that ‘connoisseurs in taste, not only often, but generally are given up to idle, capricious and mischievous passions’ and that ‘they could perhaps make less claims than others to any superiority of attachment to moral principles.’ This was doubtless true then: it is true now. Human nature changes little. No one can have lived much in the society of those whom Kant calls connoisseurs of taste, and whom we may more con­veniently call æsthetes, without noticing how seldom it is that you find in them the modesty, the tolerance, the loving-kindness and liberality, in short the good­ness with which you might have expected their addiction to spiritual pleasures to inform them. If the delight in æsthetic appreciation is no more than the opium of an intelligentsia it is no more than, as Kant says, a mischievous distraction. If it is more it should enable its possessor to acquire virtue. Kant finely says that beauty is the symbol of morality. Unless the love of beauty ennobles the character, and that is the only purposiveness of beauty that seems, as far as I can see, important enough to give it value, then I can’t tell how we can escape from Bentham’s affirmation that if the amount of pleasure obtained from each be equal there is nothing to choose between poetry and push-pin.