

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Harte
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Irving
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Doré Chekhov da Shaw Benedict Pushkin
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Laurus Nobilis Chapters on Art and Life

Vernon Lee

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LAURUS NOBILIS
BY
VERNON LEE.

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LAURUS NOBILIS.

CHAPTERS ON ART AND LIFE.

TO

ANGELICA RASPONI DALLE TESTE

FROM

HER GRATEFUL OLD FRIEND AND NEIGHBOUR

VERNON LEE.

1885-1908.

Die Realität der Dinge ist der Dinge Werk;
der Schein der Dinge ist der Menschen Werk;
und ein Gemüt, das sich am Scheine weidet,
ergötzt sich schon nicht mehr an dem, was es
empfängt, sondern an dem, was es tut.

SCHILLER, *Briefe über Ästhetik*.

THE USE OF BEAUTY.

I.

One afternoon, in Rome, on the way back from the Aventine, the road-mender climbed onto the tram as it trotted slowly along, and fastened to its front, alongside of the place of the driver, a bough of budding bay.

Might one not search long for a better symbol of what we may all do by our life? Bleakness, wind, squalid streets, a car full of heterogeneous people, some very dull, most very common; a laborious jog-trot all the way. But to redeem it all with the pleasantness of beauty and the charm of significance, this laurel branch.

II.

Our language does not possess any single word wherewith to sum up the various categories of things (made by nature or made by man, intended solely for the purpose of subserving by mere coincidence) which minister to our organic and many-sided æsthetic instincts: the things affecting us in that absolutely special, unmistakable, and hitherto mysterious manner expressed in our finding them *beautiful*. It is of the part which such things – whether actually present or merely shadowed in our mind – can play in our life; and of the influence of the instinct for beauty on the other instincts making up our nature, that I would treat in these pages. And for this reason I have been glad to accept from the hands of chance, and of that road-mender of the tram-way, the bay laurel as a symbol of what we have no word to express: the aggregate of all art, all poetry, and particularly of all poetic and artistic vision and emotion.

For the Bay Laurel – *Laurus Nobilis* of botanists – happens to be not merely the evergreen, unfading plant into which Apollo metamorphosed, while pursuing, the maiden whom he loved, even as the poet, the artist turns into immortal shapes his own quite personal and transient moods, or as the fairest realities, nobly sought, are transformed, made evergreen and restoratively fragrant for all time in our memory and fancy. It is a plant of noblest utility, averting, as the ancients thought, lightning from the dwellings it surrounded, even as disinterested love for beauty averts from our minds the dangers which fall on the vain and the covetous; and curing many aches and fevers, even as the contemplation of beauty refreshes and invigorates our spirit. Indeed, we seem to be reading a description no longer of the virtues of the bay laurel, but of the *virtues* of all beautiful sights and sounds, of all beautiful thoughts and emotions, in reading the following quaint and charming words of an old herbal: –

"The bay leaves are of as necessary use as any other in garden or orchard, for they serve both for pleasure and profit, both for ornament and use, both for honest civil uses and for physic; yea, both for the sick and for the sound, both for the living

and for the dead. The bay serveth to adorn the house of God as well as of man, to procure warmth, comfort, and strength to the limbs of men and women;... to season vessels wherein are preserved our meats as well as our drinks; to crown or encircle as a garland the heads of the living, and to stick and deck forth the bodies of the dead; so that, from the cradle to the grave we have still use of it, we have still need of it."

III.

Before beginning to expound the virtues of Beauty, let me, however, insist that these all depend upon the simple and mysterious fact that—well, that the Beautiful *is* the Beautiful. In our discussion of what the Bay Laurel symbolises, let us keep clear in our memory the lovely shape of the sacred tree, and the noble places in which we have seen it.

There are bay twigs, gathered together in bronze sheaves, in the great garland surrounding Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise. There are two interlaced branches of bay, crisp-edged and slender, carved in fine low relief inside the marble chariot in the Vatican. There is a fan-shaped growth of Apollo's Laurel behind that Venetian portrait of a poet, which was formerly called Ariosto by Titian. And, most suggestive of all, there are the Mycenaean bay leaves of beaten gold, so incredibly thin one might imagine them to be the withered crown of a nameless singer in a forgotten tongue, grown brittle through three thousand years and more.

Each of such presentments, embodying with loving skill some feature of the plant, enhances by association the charm of its reality, accompanying the delight of real bay-trees and bay leaves with inextricable harmonics, vague recollections of the delight of bronze, of delicately cut marble, of marvellously beaten gold, of deep Venetian crimson and black and auburn.

But best of all, most satisfying and significant, is the remembrance of the bay-trees themselves. They greatly affect the troughs of watercourses, among whose rocks and embanked masonry they love to strike their roots. In such a stream trough, on a spur of the Hill of Fiesole, grow the most beautiful poet's laurels I can think of. The place is one of those hollowings out of a hillside which, revealing how high they lie only by the sky-lines of distant hills, always feel so pleasantly remote. And the peace and austerity of this little valley are heightened by the dove-cot of a farm invisible in the olive-yards, and looking like a hermitage's belfry. The olives are scant and wan in the fields all round, with here and there the blossom of an almond; the oak woods, of faint wintry copper-rose, encroach above; and in the grassy space lying open to the sky, the mountain

brook is dyked into a weir, whence the crystalline white water leaps into a chain of shady pools. And there, on the brink of that weir, and all along that stream's shallow upper course among grass and brakes of reeds, are the bay-trees I speak of: groups of three or four at intervals, each a sheaf of smooth tapering boles, tufted high up with evergreen leaves, sparse bunches whose outermost leaves are sharply printed like lance-heads against the sky. Most modest little trees, with their scant berries and rare pale buds; not trees at all, I fancy some people saying. Yet of more consequence, somehow, in their calm disregard of wind, their cheerful, resolute soaring, than any other trees for miles; masters of that little valley, of its rocks, pools, and overhanging foliage; sovereign brothers and rustic demi-gods for whom the violets scent the air among the withered grass in March, and, in May, the nightingales sing through the quivering star night.

Of all southern trees, most simple and aspiring; and certainly most perfect among evergreens, with their straight, faintly carmined shoots, their pliable strong leaves so subtly rippled at the edge, and their clean, dry fragrance; delicate, austere, alert, serene; such are the bay-trees of Apollo.

IV.

I have gladly accepted, from the hands of that tram-way road-mender, the Bay Laurel—*Laurus Nobilis*—for a symbol of all art, all poetry, and all poetic and artistic vision and emotion. It has summed up, better than words could do, what the old Herbals call the *virtues*, of all beautiful things and beautiful thoughts. And it has suggested, I hope, the contents of the following notes; the nature of my attempt to trace the influence which art should have on life.

V.

Beauty, save by a metaphorical application of the word, is not in the least the same thing as Goodness, any more than beauty (despite Keats' famous assertion) is the same thing as Truth. These three objects of the soul's pursuit have different natures, different laws, and fundamentally different origins. But the energies which express themselves in their pursuit—energies vital, primordial, and necessary even to man's physical survival—have all been evolved under the same stress of adaptation of the human creature to its surroundings; and have therefore, in their beginnings and in their ceaseless growth, been working perpetually in concert, meeting, crossing, and strengthening one another, until they have become indissolubly woven together by a number of great and organic coincidences.

It is these coincidences which all higher philosophy, from Plato downwards, has strained for ever to expound. It is these coincidences, which all religion and all poetry have taken for granted. And to three of these it is that I desire to call attention, persuaded as I am that the scientific progress of our day will make short work of all the spurious æstheticism and all the shortsighted utilitarianism which have cast doubts upon the intimate and vital connection between beauty and every other noble object of our living.

The three coincidences I have chosen are: that between development of the æsthetic faculties and the development of the altruistic instincts; that between development of a sense of æsthetic harmony and a sense of the higher harmonies of universal life; and, before everything else, the coincidence between the preference for æsthetic pleasures and the nobler growth of the individual.

VI.

The particular emotion produced in us by such things as are beautiful, works of art or of nature, recollections and thoughts as well as sights and sounds, the emotion of æsthetic pleasure, has been recognised ever since the beginning of time as of a mysteriously ennobling quality. All philosophers have told us that; and the religious instinct of all mankind has practically proclaimed it, by employing for the worship of the highest powers, nay, by employing for the mere designation of the godhead, beautiful sights, and sounds, and words by which beautiful sights and sounds are suggested. Nay, there has always lurked in men's minds, and expressed itself in the metaphors of men's speech, an intuition that the Beautiful is in some manner one of the primordial and, so to speak, cosmic powers of the world. The theories of various schools of mental science, and the practice of various schools of art, the practice particularly of the persons styled by themselves æsthetes and by others decadents, have indeed attempted to reduce man's relations with the great world-power Beauty to mere intellectual dilettantism or sensual superfiness. But the general intuition has not been shaken, the intuition which recognised in Beauty a superhuman, and, in that sense, a truly divine power. And now it must become evident that the methods of modern psychology, of the great new science of body and soul, are beginning to explain the reasonableness of this intuition, or, at all events, to show very plainly in what direction we must look for the explanation of it. This much can already be asserted, and can be indicated even to those least versed in recent psychological study, to wit, that the power of Beauty, the essential power therefore of art, is due to the relations of certain visible and audible forms with the chief mental and vital functions of all human beings; relations established throughout the whole process of human and, perhaps, even of animal, evolution; relations seated in the depths of our activities, but radiating upwards even like our vague, organic sense of comfort and discomfort; and permeating, even like our obscure relations with atmospheric conditions, into our highest and clearest consciousness, colouring and altering the whole groundwork of our thoughts and feelings.

Such is the primordial, and, in a sense, the cosmic power of the Beautiful; a power whose very growth, whose constantly more complex nature proclaims its necessary and beneficial action in human evolution. It is the power of making human beings live, for the moment, in a more organically vigorous and harmonious fashion, as mountain air or sea-wind makes them live; but with the difference that it is not merely the bodily, but very essentially the spiritual life, the life of thought and emotion, which is thus raised to unusual harmony and vigour. I may illustrate this matter by a very individual instance, which will bring to the memory of each of my readers the vivifying power of some beautiful sight or sound or beautiful description. I was seated working by my window, depressed by the London outlook of narrow grey sky, endless grey roofs, and rusty elm tops, when I became conscious of a certain increase of vitality, almost as if I had drunk a glass of wine, because a band somewhere outside had begun to play. After various indifferent pieces, it began a tune, by Handel or in Handel's style, of which I have never known the name, calling it for myself the *Te Deum* Tune. And then it seemed as if my soul, and according to the sensations, in a certain degree my body even, were caught up on those notes, and were striking out as if swimming in a great breezy sea; or as if it had put forth wings and risen into a great free space of air. And, noticing my feelings, I seemed to be conscious that those notes were being played *on me*, my fibres becoming the strings; so that as the notes moved and soared and swelled and radiated like stars and suns, I also, being identified with the sound, having become apparently the sound itself, must needs move and soar with them.

We can all recollect a dozen instances when architecture, music, painting, or some sudden sight of sea or mountain, have thus affected us; and all poetry, particularly all great lyric poetry, Goethe's, Shelley's, Wordsworth's, and, above all, Browning's, is full of the record of such experience.

I have said that the difference between this æsthetic heightening of our vitality (and this that I have been describing is, I pray you to observe, the æsthetic phenomenon *par excellence*), and such other heightening of vitality as we experience from going into fresh air and sunshine or taking fortifying food, the difference between the