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Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1787)

Lecture II: Taste

(Excerpt from beginning of the chapter)

THE nature of the present undertaking leads me to begin with some enquiries concerning Taste, as it is this faculty which is always appealed to in disquisitions concerning the merit of discourse and writing.

THERE are few subjects on which men talk more loosely and indistinctly than on Taste; few which it is more difficult to explain with precision; and none which in this Course of Lectures will appear more dry or abstract. What I have to say on the subject shall be in the following order. I shall first explain the Nature of Taste as a power or faculty in the human mind. I shall next consider how far it is an improveable faculty. I shall shew the sources of its improvement, and the characters of taste in its most perfect state. I shall then examine the various fluctuations to which it is liable, and enquire whether there be any standard to which we can bring the different tastes of men, in order to distinguish the corrupted from the true.

TASTE may be defined:

"The power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art."

The first question that occurs concerning it is, whether it is to be considered as an internal sense, or as an exertion of reason? Reason is a very general term; but if we understand by it, that power of the mind which in speculative matters discovers truth, and in practical matters judges of the fitness of means to an end, I apprehend the question may be easily answered. For nothing can be more clear, than that taste is not resolveable into any such operation of Reason. It is not merely through a discovery of the understanding or a deduction of argument, that the mind receives pleasure from a beautiful prospect or a fine poem. Such objects often strike us intuitively, and make a strong impression when we are unable to assign the reasons of our being pleased. They sometimes strike in the same manner the philosopher and the peasant; the boy and the man. Hence the faculty by which we relish such beauties, seems more a-kin to a feeling of sense, than to a process of the understanding; and accordingly from an external sense it has borrowed its name; that sense by which we receive and distinguish the pleasures of food having, in several languages, given rise to the word Taste in the metaphorical meaning under which we now consider it. However, as in all subjects which regard the operations of the mind, the inaccurate use of words is to be carefully avoided, it must not be inferred from what I have said, that reason is excluded from the exertions of taste. Though taste, beyond doubt, be ultimately founded on a certain natural and instinctive sensibility to beauty, yet reason, as I shall shew hereafter, assists Taste in many of its operations, and serves to enlarge its power*.

TASTE, in the sense in which I have explained it, is a faculty common in some degree to all men. Nothing that belongs to human nature is more universal than the relish of beauty of one kind or other; of what is orderly, proportioned, grand, harmonious, new, or sprightly. In children, the rudiments of Taste discover themselves very early in a thousand instances; in their fondness for regular bodies, their admiration of pictures and statues, and imitations of all kinds; and their strong attachment to whatever is new or

marvellous. The most ignorant peasants are delighted with ballads and tales, and are struck with the beautiful appearances of nature in the earth and heavens. Even in the deserts of America, where human nature shews itself in its most uncultivated state, the savages have their ornaments of dress, their war and their death songs, their harangues, and their orators. We must therefore conclude the principles of Taste to be deeply founded in the human mind. It is no less essential to man to have some discernment of beauty, than it is to possess the attributes of reason and of speech.

BUT although none be wholly devoid of this faculty, yet the degrees in which it is possessed are widely different. In some men only the feeble glimmerings of Taste appear; the beauties which they relish are of the coarsest kind; and of these they have but a weak and confused impression: while in others, Taste rises to an acute discernment, and a lively enjoyment of the most refined beauties. In general, we may observe, that in the powers and pleasures of Taste, there is a more remarkable inequality among men than is usually found in point of common sense, reason, and judgment. The constitution of our nature in this, as in all other respects, discovers admirable wisdom. In the distribution of those talents which are necessary for man's well-being, Nature hath made less distinction among her children. But in the distribution of those which belong only to the ornamental part of life, she hath bestowed her favours with more frugality. She hath both sown the seeds more sparingly; and rendered a higher culture requisite for bringing them to perfection.

THIS inequality of Taste among men is owing, without doubt, in part, to the different frame of their natures; to nicer organs, and finer internal powers, with which some are endowed beyond others. But, if it be owing in part to nature, it is owing to education and culture still more. The illustration of this leads to my next remark on this subject, that Taste is a most improveable faculty, if there be any such in human nature; a remark which gives great encouragement to such a course of study as we are now proposing to pursue. Of the truth of this assertion we may easily be convinced, by only reflecting on that immense superiority which education and improvement give to civilized, above barbarous nations, in refinement of Taste; and on the superiority which they give in the same nation to those who have studied the liberal arts, above the rude and untaught vulgar. The difference is so great, that there is perhaps no one particular in which these two classes of men are so far removed from each other, as in respect of the powers and the pleasures of Taste: and assuredly for this difference no other general cause can be assigned, but culture and education.—I shall now proceed to shew what the means are, by which Taste becomes so remarkably susceptible of cultivation and progress.

REFLECT first upon that great law of our nature, that exercise is the chief source of improvement in all our faculties. This holds both in our bodily, and in our mental powers. It holds even in our external senses; although these be less the subject of cultivation than any of our other faculties. We see how acute the senses become in persons whose trade or business leads to nice exertions of them. Touch, for instance, becomes infinitely more exquisite in men whose employment requires them to examine the polish of bodies, than it is in others. They who deal in microscopical observations, or are accustomed to engrave on precious stones, acquire surprising accuracy of sight in discerning the minutest objects; and practice in attending to different flavours and tastes of liquors, wonderfully improves the power of distinguishing them, and of tracing their composition. Placing internal Taste therefore on the footing of a simple sense, it cannot be doubted that frequent exercise, and curious attention to its proper objects, must greatly heighten its power. Of this we have one clear proof in that part of Taste, which is called an ear for music. Experience every days shews, that nothing is more improveable. Only the simplest and plainest compositions are relished at first; use and practice extend our pleasure; teach us to relish finer melody, and by degrees enable us to enter into the intricate and compounded pleasures of harmony. So

an eye for the beauties of painting is never all at once acquired. It is gradually formed by being conversant among pictures, and studying the works of the best masters.

PRECISELY in the same manner, with respect to the beauty of composition and discourse, attention to the most approved models, study of the best authors, comparisons of lower and higher degrees of the same beauties, operate towards the refinement of Taste. When one is only beginning his acquaintance with works of genius, the sentiment which attends them is obscure and confused. He cannot point out the several excellencies or blemishes of a performance which he peruses; he is at a loss on what to rest his judgment; all that can be expected is, that he should tell in general whether he be pleased or not. But allow him more experience in works of this kind, and his Taste becomes by degrees more exact and enlightened. He begins to perceive not only the character of the whole, but the beauties and defects of each part; and is able to describe the peculiar qualities which he praises or blames. The mist dissipates which seemed formerly to hang over the object; and he can at length pronounce firmly, and without hesitation, concerning it. Thus in Taste, considered as mere sensibility, exercise opens a great source of improvement.

BUT although Taste be ultimately founded on sensibility, it must not be considered as instinctive sensibility alone. Reason and good sense, as I before hinted, have so extensive an influence on all the operations and decisions of Taste, that a thorough good Taste may well be considered as a power compounded of natural sensibility to beauty, and of improved understanding. In order to be satisfied of this, let us observe, that the greater part of the productions of genius are no other than imitations of nature; representations of the characters, actions, or manners of men. The pleasure we receive from such imitations or representations is founded on mere Taste: but to judge whether they be properly executed, belongs to the understanding, which compares the copy with the original.

IN reading, for instance, such a poem as the Aeneid, a great part of our pleasure arises from the plan or story being well conducted, and all the parts joined together with probability and due connexion; from the characters being taken from nature, the sentiments being suited to the characters, and the style to the sentiments. The pleasure which arises from a poem so conducted, is felt or enjoyed by Taste as an internal sense; but the discovery of this conduct in the poem is owing to reason; and the more that reason enables us to discover such propriety in the conduct, the greater will be our pleasure. We are pleased, through our natural sense of beauty. Reason shews us why, and upon what grounds, we are pleased. Wherever in works of Taste, any resemblance to nature is aimed at; wherever there is any reference of parts to a whole, or of means to an end, as there is indeed in almost every writing and discourse, there the understanding must always have a great part to act.

HERE then is a wide field for reason's exerting its powers in relation to the objects of Taste, particularly with respect to composition, and works of genius; and hence arises a second and a very considerable source of the improvement of Taste, from the application of reason and good sense to such productions of genius. Spurious beauties, such as unnatural characters, forced sentiments, affected style, may please for a little; but they please only because their opposition to nature and to good sense has not been examined, or attended to. Once shew how nature might have been more justly imitated or represented: how the writer might have managed his subject to greater advantage; the illusion will presently be dissipated, and those false beauties will please no more.

FROM these two sources then, first, the frequent exercise of Taste, and next the application of good sense and reason to the objects of Taste, Taste as a power of the mind receives its improvement. In its perfect state, it is undoubtedly the result both of nature and of art. It supposes our natural sense of

beauty to be refined by frequent attention to the most beautiful objects, and at the same time to be guided and improved by the light of the understanding....

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