

PROF . COLLINGWOOD'S THEORY OF

ART

Beauty as “ Sublimity -- Comic” Synthesis

“ Beauty is the satisfying nature of an object”. But beauty is not by any means explained by the above description. It is clear that there are available two factors namely the subject and the object, the subject who experiences the satisfaction regarding the object, and the object itself that has entered into the cognito – affective relationship with the subject. Prof Collingswood contends that there are two varieties of this relationship, a superiority- relation and an inferiority relation, the first being the expression of the comic and the second of the sublime. If the object is superior to the subject then there happens the feeling of sublimity, whereas if the subject is superior to the object there occurs the sense of the comic. “Sublimity is beauty which forces itself upon our mind, beauty which strikes us as it were against our will and in spite of ourselves, beauty which we accept passively and have not discovered by a deliberate search for it in the place where we should expect to find it.” (A Philosophy of Art . p 35) Kant held sublimity to consist in natural beauty inclusive of all the laws of order and causality. He rightly distinguished between beauty that human creation and beauty that is divine creation.¹ Beauty pertains to the individual *per se*, sublimity to the organized total nature. But this distinction, though it is an improvement is so far as it tends to refer to the wide gulf that separates human art from Divine Art, is by no means without the fault of theology. Not that theological explanation must suffer from the criticism of unintelligibility. But where we can have

¹ Cf. Critique of Judgment: Kant

another kind of explanation it is necessary to see whether that is enough. It is found that it is the *depth of suggestion* or *infinite suggestibility* that leads over the mind and not merely the creationism of God or cosmic expansiveness of the Heavens above.

The comic – aspect which Prof. Collingswood affirms to be another elementary form of beauty is seen in the ‘collapse of the sublime’ : “ We exalt ourselves and abase the object.” It is the finiteness of the object which in comparison with ourselves appears to be infinitely inferior to us. He even goes to the extent of saying that the comic “ is the object of aesthetic frame of mind which may be called the revolt or reaction against sublimity.” (p37) And finally he draws the inference that ‘the synthesis of the sublime and the comic therefore gives us the beautiful in the full sense of the world’. (p41).

It may be asked how this dual role could be played by a self-identical object of beauty. It appears that we alternate in such a manner as to be superior to the object at some moments (as perhaps when we cognize it) , and inferior to it at others (as perhaps when we are affected by it), if such an experience is conceded, then there is nothing against the above theory of successive experiences integrating with one another in order to grant us the feeling of satisfaction- of beauty. But it is a fact, despite these two successive experiences being possibly real, that the feeling of beauty cannot be said to be a first product but a secondary-formation. And in so far as it is a secondary formation, it is product of two different types of experience and not a unitary synthesis. We can of course, have recourse to a theory that quantity or duality here ‘condenses’ itself into unity of experience that somehow is different from the previous processes of cognizing and affective reception of stimuli from the object.

Prof . Collingwood does not pose this problem at all. His own problem is different. It is , how do sublimity and comic sense combine in order to produce the sense of beauty? He says “In true beauty there is always present not so much sublimity itself as a transmuted form of sublimity : the mind is not so much overwhelmed with the shock of an unexpected glory as touched to a calm solemnity, a hush in which it hears the voice of the authentic divinity, And there is also present not so much a frankly comic element as an element of sublime comedy, a laughter softened into a smile with which we all naturally contemplate beauty,” . 41.) By a suggestion that it is neither true sublimity nor the frankly comic spirit that is the essential quality of beauty, Prof. Collingwood seeks to bridge the opposition he had created at the beginning in order to reveal a dialectic of opposite forces leading to a synthesis, even in beauty. This is

despite Croce, whom he follows in many respects. Further he seems to need in escape from a clear dialectic of opposites by way of a sublimity of the cosmic heavens could ever shock us into a silence so profound and unimaginable as not to permit us to create it for ourselves in poem or in paint, Obviously the dichotomy is not fundamental. Even as a classification it owes its existence not so much to art as it does to metaphysics and epistemology. Psychologically, it is relevant in so far as there does happen the superior-or-inferior-feeling. The passage from the sublime to the comic or vice versa is due to the fusion of the subjective and objective temperamental or personality-phases dependent indeed on the growth and evolution of the personality itself. But this by no means offers us an explanation that is more than what has been said regarding the relationship subsisting between the subject and the object.

Prof Collingwood's suggestion that there are only two fundamentals of beauty is indeed valuable but linked up with the subject's superiority and inferiority states with reference to the object, it leads to a type of idealistic interpretation that is all the more repugnant since it is in no sense true. Further there are other elements or emotions or sentiments to which the Indian Theory of Art makes reference. There are at least seven more emotions that have to be reckoned with. Even from the stand- point or psychology of types, the two types here enunciated are inadequate, even if it be contended that Aesthetics takes into consideration only these two. Since Art in one sense is a mirror of Life and is also an improvement on Life, a richer imagination and a supreme fertility grants a wider range of emotions and types to Art. How ever this might be, in any art- production only one emotion is dominantly expressed : it forms the major note of the universe of expression at any one moment in order to focus the attention and the fascination of the enjoyer. The rest are subordinated to this fundamental emotion in an organic manner. It is this dominant experience, at once a unity of one emotion, and yet organic with other emotions, that is experienced as artistic excellence , It is only necessary to look at any work of art : we have one major emotion as it were flowing out of it, assisted by or mixing itself imperceptibly with other emotions, varying in different quantities, and yet forming a harmonious unity producing the total-effect of a rich simplicity. This new configuration of sentiment (we have used emotion and sentiment throughout interchangeably)

Is perhaps, what Prof. Collingwood really means when he says that Beauty is the inter-fusion of the sublime and the comic which means, that *configuration*, that is arrived at by the subordination of the one under the other in a unique manner. Whether it is this that Prof. Collingwood is driving at or not in his exposition, it is clear that if Art has the supreme merit of synthetic dynamism realizing a unity in its creation, it is due to the new configurative creation of sentiments, within the content of the specific society or ethos or culture. This utter and complete realization of configurative excellence is according to Indian thinkers on Art best realized through Drama.

As to the suggestion that in the artist's work there is a mellowing of or watering down of the force of impact of fascination or what Prof. Collingwood calls 'transmutation' in what sense should we take transmutation to occur? It is not certainly a kind of sublimation in the Freudian sense. Is transmutation or change into something else a necessity almost like the necessity of an object to appear as *if* it had colors and sounds and tastes which it never had? Again let us suppose that the mind has acted as the mellowing agent making us contemplate the object without flurry and excitement, without superiority or inferiority intervening during the contemplation but as equals meeting one another in utter sympathy and understanding, is it the same as the sublime comedy of Prof. Collingwood? Most of us would certainly agree that this cannot be. Sublimity arrests laughter, makes laughter turn into a smile. Thus laughter undergoes transmutation. Similarly laughter perhaps arrests sublimity and turns it into a smile—a smile of satisfaction, be it noted and ; not one of derision. This explanation is indeed too simple to permit of its acceptance. The Adlerian explanation of laughter does not do full justice to artistic expression. Psychoanalytic explanation of Art is as near to or as far from truth as Bergson's.

Experience of beauty is neither fully explained by the theory of intuitive spontaneity nor the sublime-comedy theory of Prof. Collingwood. Experience of Beauty really is the experience of perfect attainment as Aristotle long ago said. This perfect attainment is possible only through the utter understanding of the inward spiritual nature of a thing as holding within it the truth and essence of divine existence. It is the perfect attainment of meaning (concept) and feeling. (intuition) within the object of

beauty. Such perfect attainment is it, fullest and widest measure is available in the ideal Being-God, or what the Indian Vedantist will affirm in his Brahman, which is at once One and all. Thus every object that partakes in his essence radiates this perfect attainment or harmony. Such an attainment leads to that real sense of solemnity and holiness, satisfying all truest knowledge and feeling