ÆSTHETIC PAPERS.

THE WORD "ÆSTHETIC."

Of all the scientific terms in common use, perhaps no one conveys to the mind a more vague and indeterminable sense than this, at the same time that the user is always conscious of a meaning and appropriateness; so that he is in the position of one who endeavors to convey his sense of the real presence of an idea, which still he cannot himself fully grasp and account for.

We have adopted this vague, this comprehensive, but undefined word, in our titlepage; thereby rendering ourselves responsible for some account, however incomplete, of that which it stands for to us.

We should render little assistance by referring the reader to Dictionary or Encyclopedia. He might there find, that the word *æsthetics* implies a "philosophy of poetry and the fine arts:" but he that has used the word but twice perceives, that it is more than this; that, like carbon or oxygen, it is an element that encounters his inquiry in the most unexpected forms; that what he took for simple substances, as air or water, are chemical combinations, into which his new element largely enters, and which cannot exist without it.

The "æsthetic element," then, is in our view neither a theory of the beautiful, nor a philosophy of art, but a component and indivisible part in all human creations which are not mere works of necessity; in other words, which are based on idea, as distinguished from appetite.

Sundry pairs of words, dualistic philosophical terms, have been long growing into use, and exercising, by the ideas they represent, an influence on the world of thought; such as subjective and objective, personal and impersonal, the Me and the Not-me; all having a reference to the central fact of the constant relation of the individual to the universal, and of their equally constant separation. The one always "works and lives in the other;" and, according to the preponderance of the one or the other element, the most various results appear in individuals and in nations.

Historians have remarked, and our own eyes see and have seen, the "profound impersonality" which is the characteristic of the German genius, as distinguished from the vivid personality of the French. *L'état, c'est moi!* was a concentrated formula of that personal character which is equally apparent in the centralizing murders of the Merovingian dynasty, and in those analogous assassinations whereby, thirteen centuries after, each petty deputy strove to make his personality the central life of France.

It results from these diverse characteristics, that the Frenchman has always shone in action, where the strong personal feeling, the consciousness of the self, leads to the most brilliant results, — the heroic of action. The German, on the contrary, is infinitely greatest in thought, easily placing his less exacting personality on one side, so that it should shed no disturbing colors upon his calm objective view.

Into the world of art also, as into that of politics and life, these self-opposing and neutralizing elements enter. Each man, according to his personal or unpersonal mode of being, according to the predominance of the subjective or the objective in his nature, takes the one or the other position. The French school of criticism, the personal, is based upon *taste*. It inquires, Does this work satisfy and please my taste, that is the taste of cultivated persons; the taste of the best judges or authorities? A shifting standard, offering no absolute criterion; which places the highest aim of art in pleasing; asking triumphantly, What, then, becomes of art, if its object be not to please? According to the German formula, this is to subordinate the object to the observer.

The contrary position, the unpersonal, which sinks and subordinates the observer to the object, — which, by putting my personality aside, enables me to see the object in a pure uncolored light, — is the æsthetic.

Germany is the discoverer of the æsthetic, because the German mind, more than any other, embodies the unpersonal principle that underlies the æsthetic view. It became conscious of its own possession, as soon as its criticism began to apply itself to the region of literature and the arts. But it is singular, that, armed with this talisman to explore and expound the mysteries of art, there is a peculiar deficiency in the modern German attempts in the arts that address themselves to the eye. It reminds us of a man, trying, in a painstaking manner, to imitate the sports and feats that he failed to learn in his youth; so that the untaught, unscientific skill of a vigorous child shoots at a bound far beyond him.

How, then, do we account for the wonders that German art achieved in architecture in old time, and lately in music? Simply by the recollection, that these arts were German growths, antecedent to any conscious æsthetic criticism. Moreover, the arts may be classified, as partaking, in a greater or less degree, of the individual or the universal. Music and architecture, by their nature, are of a more universal expression than painting and sculpture, and belong more naturally to the German.

The progress of art, considered with relation to these two principles, is as follows: — All art, in its origin, is national and religious. The feeling expressed is of far greater importance than the vehicle in which it is conveyed. The practical portion of early art is conventional: the spiritual is profoundly significant, confined in its range, narrow but exalted. An expression of the infinite by means of the beautiful, inadequate indeed as expression, but deeply interesting, as is all inadequate expression, to those who can read the intention through the uncertain and vague embodiment.

The second step in art is when the practical, resting on this deep spiritual basis, advances by means of individual

powers, by the personal skill, set free from the national conventionality, yet still confined within certain bounds, the limit and frame, as it were, of true art; — a second expression of the infinite by the beautiful, in which the beauty and satisfactoriness of the expression balances the less deep significance of the idea.

In the first stage, the æsthetic element prevailed unconsciously; for neither taste nor the æsthetic principle has any conscious place in creative, but only in critical ages. The progress of criticism is the reverse of that of art. In the creative age, appreciation is simple, intuitive, passionate, of which the delight of the people in national songs, the passionate enthusiasm with which the Florentines welcomed Cimabue's Madonna, are examples. When criticism springs up, it is first in the form of *taste*. The individual subjects the productions of art to his own personality. He says, "This is good, for it pleases me." Of course, however perfect this taste may be, it is still limited by the individuality: it is based on the degree of pleasure and satisfaction conveyed by a work to a cultivated person. It comes to be really believed, that the end and object of art is to please. Art becomes a luxury; its pleasures can be bought and sold; its appreciation becomes more and more external.

Such was the condition of criticism, when the profound self-subordinating genius of Germany perceived, in the deep significance of ancient works, the presence of an element which the individual mind, with its standard of beauty, and its idea of gratification to the senses, was utterly unable to account for. The Germans went to school to their own ancient paintings, those singularly national works in which a childlike, simple, often unartistic exterior is made to convey the consciousness of the highest spiritual ideal.

The word *æsthetic* is difficult of definition, because it is the watchword of a whole revolution in criticism. Like Whig and Tory, it is the standard of a party; it marks the progress of an idea. It is as a watchword we use it, to designate, in our department, that phase in human progress which subordinates the individual to the general, that he may re-appear on a higher plane of individuality.