

## CANOVA.

Nature, onde legge ebbe ogni cosa,  
 Chi pietra, e moto in un congiunti vede,  
 Per un instante si riman pensosa!

*Pindemonte on the Hebe of Canova.*

I WELL remember when I first saw the work which called forth this graceful flattery. We saw very little sculpture here, and there was a longing for those serene creations, which correspond, both from the material used and the laws of the art, to the highest state of the mind. For the arts are no luxury, no mere ornament and stimulus to a civic and complicated existence, as the worldling and the ascetic alike delight in representing them to be, but the herbarium in which are preserved the fairest flowers of man's existence, the magic mirror by whose aid all its phases are interpreted, the circle into which the various spirits of the elements may be invoked and made to reveal the secret they elsewhere manifest only in large revolutions of time; and what philosophy, with careful steps and anxious ear, has long sought in vain, is oftentimes revealed at once by a flash from this torch.

With thoughts like these, not clearly understood, but firmly rooted in the mind, was read an advertisement of "some of Canova's principal works, copied by his pupils." Canova! The name was famous. He was the pride of modern Italy, the prince of modern art, and now we were to see enough of the expressions of his thought to know how God, nature, and man stood related in the mind of this man. He had studied these in their eternal affinities, and written the result on stone. How much we should learn of the past, how stand assured in the present, how feel the wings grow for the future!

With such feelings we entered the cold and dingy room, far better prepared surely than the chosen people, when they saw the prophet descend from the Mount of vision, with the record of the moral law also inscribed on stone. For they were led, but we were seekers. But, alas! alas! what dread downfall from this height of expectation! The Hebe, so extolled above, was the first object that met the eye. Hebe! Was this the ever-blooming joy that graced the golden tables?

Then there were the Dancers, there the Magdalen, Gods and Goddesses, Geniuses, with torches reversed, and other bright ideals of our thought, all so graceful, so beautifully draped and so — French it seemed to us, our own street figures infinitely refined — can this be all? Does not the artist, even, read any secret in his time beyond the love of approbation, the shades of sentiment, and the cultivation of the physique, not for health, but to charm the eyes of other men? We did not wish to see the old Greek majesty; what *that* says we knew. The coarsest plaster cast had shown us what they knew of the fulness of strength, fulness of repose, equipoise of faculties desirable for man. But was there nothing for us? No high meaning to the dark mysteries of our day, no form of peculiar beauty hid beneath its beggarly disguises?

Time has not changed this view of the works of Canova, but, after the first chill of disappointment was over, when we no longer expected to find a genius, a poet in the artist, we have learnt to value him as a man of taste, and to understand why he filled such a niche in the history of his time. And what we partly knew before, has now been made more clear by

Missirini's life of him, which has only of late fallen in our way, though published as early as 1824.

As the book has not, we believe, been translated, a notice of leading facts in the life, and version of passages in which Canova expressed his thoughts may be acceptable to the few, who have time to spare from rooting up tares in the field of polemics or politics, and can believe there is use in looking at the flowers of this heavenly garden through the fence which forbids Yankee hands their darling privilege to touch, at least, if they may not take.

Canova, as we have said, was not a genius, he did not work from the centre, he saw not into his own time, cast no light upon the future. As a man of taste, he refined the methods of his art, reformed it from abuses, well understood its more definite objects, and as far as talent and high culture could, fulfilled them. If not himself a great artist, he was, by his words and works, an able commentator on great artists. And intermediate powers of this kind must be held in honor, like ambassadors between might otherwise remain insular and poor.

As a character, he was religious in modesty, reverence, and fidelity. Life was truly to him a matter of growth, and action only so far valuable as expressive of this fact. It is therefore a pleasure to look on the chronicle of marble, where the meaning of his days is engraved. A monotony of conception, indeed, makes this a brief study, though the names alone of his works fill eighteen pages of Missirini's book. In labor, he was more indefatigable, probably, than if he had lived a deeper life; his was all one scene of outward labor, and meditation of its means, from childhood to advanced age; he never felt the needs common to higher natures, of leaving the mind at times fallow, that it may be prepared for a richer harvest; he never waited in powerless submission, for the uprise of the tide of soul. His works show this want of depth, and his views of art no less; but both have great merits as far as they go, — his works in their execution, his views as to accurate perceptions of the range of art, and the use of means.

It is intended to make farther use of the remarks of Canova in another way. But it will not forestall but rather prepare for the relation in which they will there be placed to present them here. Not all are given but only that portion most important in the eyes of the translator.

These sayings of Canova were written down from his lips by his friend and biographer, Missirini, who seems an Italian in sensibility, and an Englishman in quiet self-respect. He has obviously given us, not only the thought but the turn of expression; there is in the original a penetrating gentleness, and artist-like grace which give a charm to very slight intimations. This fineness of tone, if not represented in its perfection by the English idiom, will not, I hope, be quite lost, for it is more instructive than the thoughts in detail. The same purity of manner, which so well expresses the habit of intercourse with the purest material and noblest of arts, gave dignity to Mr Greenough's late memorial to Congress on the subject of his Washington; and the need there displayed of stating anew to this country rules of taste, which have passed into maxims elsewhere, is reason enough why such remarks, as these of Canova, should be offered to the careful attention of persons, who wish to fit themselves for intelligent enjoyment of the beautiful arts.

When Missirini, struck by the excellence of what he wrote, down from the familiar discourse of the master, urged him to publish his thoughts in print, he always declined, saying, "opinions, precepts, rules are well enough in their place, but example is far more valuable. It is

my profession to work as well as I can, not to lecture; nor would I, for treasures, take upon myself the task of arguing with irritable pedants."

He said also that he did not confide in his own judgment as to the value of his observations; he knew only that they were "dictated by the intimate feeling of art, by meditation bent constantly upon it, and, finally, the mistress experience," that he had no pretensions which justified his imposing his opinion on others, but could only offer it for the private judgment of each hearer.

Let the reader then receive the following remarks as they were made, as familiar talk of the artist with the friends who loved him, and, if awake to such sympathies or with a mind exercised on such topics, he will scarcely fail to derive instruction and pleasure from the gentle flow of earnest thought, and the air of delicacy and retirement in the mind of the thinker. We are with him in the still cool air of the studio, blocks of marble lie around, grand in their yet undisclosed secret, and the forms of nymphs and heroes inform the walls with their almost perfected beauty. The profound interpretations of a poetic soul, weaving into new forms the symbols of nature, and revealing her secret by divine re-creation, will not there be felt; the thoughts of this sculptor are only new readings of the text, faithful glosses in the margin, but as such, in themselves refined, and for us, in a high degree, refining and suggestive. Genius must congratulate herself on so faithful a disciple, though he be not a son, but a minister only of her royal house; and Art, having poured forth her gifts, must be grateful to one who knew so well how to prize, select, and dispose them.

---

#### OBSERVATIONS OF CANOVA, RECORDED BY MISSIRINI.

##### I.

Even because Canova had so at heart the interests of the arts, it grieved him to see such a multitude of young men devoting themselves to this service; for he said, they cannot, for the most part, fail to be poor and unhappy. Italy and the world are filled to satiety with works of art, and what employment can all these disciples find? — But the worst is that they will foster brute mediocrity, for excellence was never the portion of many, and through excellence alone can any good be effected. The academies should accept all to try the capacity of each, but when they have ascertained that a pupil has no extraordinary powers for art, then dismiss him, that he may, as a citizen, apply himself to some useful calling; for I fear that this multitude who are not fit for the upward path, will drag down with them those who are better, and where they have begun to do ill, will run into every folly; for the arts, turned into the downward direction, find no stay, but are soon precipitated into total ruin.

##### II.

I do not call a work fine, merely because I find no faults in it. The most sublime works are not faultless; they are so great because, beside the beauty which satisfies the intellect, they have the beauty of inspiration which assails the senses and triumphs over the heart; they have within themselves the affection, within themselves the life, and make us weep, rejoice, or be troubled at their will; and this is the true beauty.

##### III.

I am always studying the shortest and simplest way to reach my object, as the blow which comes most direct strikes with most force, whence I would not wish to be delayed by vain ornaments and distractions.

#### IV.

Imitate nature alone, not any particular master. If you go to the master, let it be that he may point out to you how you may see and copy nature, as she was by him seen and copied; study nature through his eyes, and choose rather the ancient, the Greek masters, for they more than any others had a free field for seeing and copying nature and knew better than any others how to do it.

But if you wish to imitate a master, especially in painting, do with him as with nature; that is to say, as in nature you choose the fairest features, so in the master choose out his better parts, and leave those in which he has shown his human imperfections. Too often the worst parts of a famous master are imitated as much as any.

#### V.

Do you seek in nature some beautiful part, and fail to find it, be not discouraged, continue long enough the search, and you will see it in some form at last; for all is to be found in nature, provided you know how to look for it.

But if you wish to be saved many and tedious researches, and proceed straight forward, I will teach you this way.

Become first of all skillful in your art, that is, know drawing, anatomy, and dignity, feel grace, understand and enjoy beauty, be moved by your own conceptions, possess, in short, all the requisites of art in an eminent degree, and you will find yourself in the secure way I mean. — And beware that you take no other. — Then, if you find in nature some trait of admirable grace and beauty, it will suffice; for you will know how to bring all other parts into harmony with this, and thus produce beautiful and perfect wholes.

But this, you say, is difficult. Well do I know it is difficult, and therefore I admonish you to give yourself with all your force to study; for when you are great in art, you will know no more of difficulties.

#### VI.

In daily life, I have always seen graceful men gain the advantage over severe men; for grace is an omnipotence, conquering hearts. Be sure it is the same in art; acquire grace, and you will be happy; but take heed that, as, the man who in society affects grace and has it not is disgraced, so the artist, who too sedulously seeks it, instead of pleasing annoys us. Hold thyself in the just medium. And this I say to you only in case you feel within yourself the native capacity for this graceful being; for, if you are cold as to this amiable dominion, seek it not; your case is desperate. Follow then art in its rigor, for severity has also its honor.

And the same temperance as in grace I would advise as to expression; that you be always self-poised and composed, showing moderation and serenity of mind. All violence is deformity. This temperance gave the palm to Raphael above all the imitators of beauty.

#### VII.

Sculpture is only one of various dialects, through which the eloquence of art expresses nature. It is a heroic dialect, like tragedy among the poetic dialects, and, as the terrible is the first element of the tragic, so is the nude first element in the dialect of sculpture. And, as the terrible should in the tragic epopea be expressed with the utmost dignity, so the nude should in statuary be signified in the fairest and noblest forms.

Here art and letters agree as to the treatment of their subjects.

While invention and disposition keep close to nature and reason in elocution and execution, it is permitted and required to leave the vulgar ways of custom and seek an expression, great, sublime, composed of what is best both in nature and idea.

### VIII.

Money is in no way more legitimately gained than through the fine arts, because men can do without these objects, and are never forced by necessity to buy them. They are articles of luxury, and should leave no doubt of a free love in the buyer. Therefore, however great may be the price set upon a work of art, it can never be extravagant.

Rules and measurements, he observed to an artist, when just, are immutable for the artist who is not perfectly sure of himself, but a master sometimes shows the height of his intelligence by departing from them. For a great artist enjoys the liberty accorded by Aristotle, who says that, in some cases we should prefer a false vraisemblance to an unpleasing truth.

The Niobe, for instance, is in wet drapery and so are many other antique figures. This is not true; but if the artist had adhered to truth, he would have been traitor to his art by foolishly encumbering the forms; thus he preferred a falsity, which brought him a beautiful verisimilitude, since, through the wet and adhesive drapery, the artist could show the forms in the full excellence of art.

Even so, to mark the strength of Hercules, the Greek gave him a bull neck, to make the Apollo more light and majestic, altered the natural proportions.

This boldness does not show ignorance which transgresses rules, but science to discern the effect, and choose the point of view, which is born of philosophy in the judgment of the artist.

### IX.

Observe how important it is that sculpture should be eminently beautiful, as most generally it must triumph by a single figure, convince and move by a single word; woe to it if this figure, this word, be not excellent!

### X.

You ought to know anatomy well, said he to some pupils, but not to make others observe this, for, if it is true that art should imitate nature, let us follow nature in this; for she does not draw attention to the anatomy, but covers it admirable, by a well-contrived veil of flesh and skin, presenting to the eyes only a gentle surface, which modulates and curves itself with ease over every projection.

### XI.

Pity that nymph cannot speak, said an Englishman, or that Hebe should not spring forward ; could but the miracle be worked here, as it was for Pygmalion, we should be perfectly content. You deceive yourself, said he; this would not give you pleasure. I do not expect by my works to deceive any one; it is obvious that they are marble, and mute and motionless; it suffices me if it be acknowledged that if I have in part conquered the material by my art and made an approach to truth. It is sufficient that being seen to be of stone, the obstacles should excuse the defects. I aspire to no illusion.

Few artists have known how to explain their thoughts in writing. If they had, there would have been many more feuds among them, and more time lost. Artists who wrote were always mediocre. It is necessary to work not write. Woe also to those literati who constitute themselves judges of art; their absurdities will avenge those whom they misjudge.

### XII.

They criticise the faults in my works, nor do I complain; such are inseparable from the works of a human being; but what does grieve me is, that they do not find there beauties enough to make them forget the faults. Yet, should fragments of my works be dug up and shown as antiques, these same persons, perhaps, would declare them excellent. Antiquity is privileged! Men are herein unjust, that they see only the beauties of the ancient, only the faults of the modern artist. But I recollect to have read the same complaint in Tacitus!

### XIII.

He was unwearied in retouching his works, saying, I seek in my material a certain spiritual element, which may serve it as a soul; imitation of forms is death to me. I would aid myself with intellect, and ennable those forms by inspiration, that they might wear at least the semblance of life, — but it may not be.

### XIV.

As to the Greeks, let us study their works to learn their methods. Let us seek the way they took, to be at the same time so select and so true.

Speaking of what gives to works of the hand the beauty of the soul, if you examine, said he, the works of the ancients, I see that these workmen strove to put soul and spirit into looks and attitudes, rather than into vestments; but, if you look at modern works, you will find the life rather in the vestments than in the person. Thus with the ancients the clothes serve and are silent, but, in modern works, they become arrogant, and the figures remain imprisoned in the cold of the marble. This inverse way, I think, has been a principal cause of the degradation of art.

### XV.

I do not like to make portraits, but prefer exercising my art in a larger way. When you have made a portrait with the best wisdom of an artist, comes the lover of the person and says, "You are far handsomer than that, I should not know it was meant for you;" here the true artist is oftentimes pulled to pieces, and one far beneath him commended.

Neither do I wish patiently to copy all the minutiae of a countenance. Resemblance should be derived from the large and important parts, from choice of the leading traits. Now I believe excellence of this kind is to be attained by seeing these parts in the historic method, and from the best point of view, so that the image may be at once like and grandiose, and may seem both true and beautiful, though the subject in nature may not be beautiful. And if it is true that the arts are the ministers to beauty, it is a crucifixion to distort them to copy vulgar subjects.

### XVI.

Seeing that certain young painters had attained the style of the earliest masters, he said, it is well that these young men should be in that simple and innocent style, which was the path taken by the greatest artists. But I hope they will know how to add to simplicity nobleness, and reach at least a boldness controlled by reason, inspired by genius, embellished by taste. For had art kept always within these limits of infancy, we should have had no Raphael, no Michel Angelo.

### XVII.

Finding certain painters discouraged because art was represented to them as something superhuman, he cheered them, saying; it makes young men too timid to persuade them, as they say Mengs did his pupils, that art is a mystery, and that none can be an artist, unless first he has been raised into Paradise, and sublimated by the most subtle ideas.

This celestial doctrine may be of use, perhaps, as to statuary; but as to painting, the excellent Venetian artists did wonders with a surprising naturalness, and with such ease that they seemed in sport.

Subtilties produce sophists only. Our old painters refined only in their works, contending only for the imitation of the true, the beautiful, of nature and human affections, and thus they produced classic works.

Good sense, an excellence which the Lord God has bestowed on but few, is all the metaphysics of our art, as I believe it may be of all things. This saying was ever in his mouth<sup>1</sup>.

### XVIII.

A respectable cavalier, seeing Canova's Venus, fancied he must have had a divinely beautiful person for his model, and begged that he would show him one of these celestial forms. Accordingly a day was appointed, the nobleman came full of eagerness, but finding a person rather coarse than beautiful, was greatly surprised. The sculptor, who was intimate with him, said, smiling, perfect beauty would never be seen by the bodily eye, if unaided by the eyes of the soul, sharpened by the fair precepts of art, in which case we do not see the model as it is, but as it ought to be, and it will suffice to gain from the model an intimation of what is good. The study of the antique helps to sharpen and steady these eyes of the intellect, as do the study of select forms in nature, in the same way as the ancients, reasoning, culture of the tastes, and the heart.

When you shall thus have directed the visual virtue of the mind, set yourself to work, you will then overcome all difficulties, and produce beautiful works upon subjects which are not beautiful. This is what I would wish to do, and it pains me the more not to reach the goal, as I know well where it stands, but the eyes of the mind have not with me force enough to conquer matter, and thus I remain mortal as I am.

### XIX.

About those masters who urge their pupils to adopt some particular style, graceful or terrible, rigid or fleshy; principles, he said, are the same for all, because they are the fruit of common sense, but the peculiar disposition allots to each one in execution his distinctive character, and here the pupil should be left quite free. Just that temper of mind which mother nature has placed in the bosom ought to influence the work; nature should not be forced, neither must we fail to obey her behests, since that is like prolonging or shortening the limbs for the bed of the famous tyrant. And if you urge nature into a path against her will, she will be sure to drive you back against your will.

### XX.

As to execution, majestic lineaments alone are not sufficient for the grand style, since they may have a dryness in their majesty.

The majestic parts, happily concorded with the medium and the little to a broad and sublime whole, constitute the grand style.

### XXI.

As to the old dispute, whether a preference is to be given to painting or sculpture, he showed pity and disdain for the idlers who lost in such contention the precious time that they might have given to work, and added, all this heat springs from the true point at issue never having been defined; that is to say, if we are thinking of invention, perhaps painting is more difficult, because more complicated than sculpture; even as music and perspective are more difficult as to invention than sculpture. Yet once ascertain the rules of music and perspective, and they become easy of execution, because they depend on fixed rules; which having once learned, the performer may proceed in safety without fatigue, and without any great intellect.

Thus we see mere youths learn music by rule, and very ordinary artists perfectly acquainted with perspective, so as to produce striking effect; yet none will allow the best scene painter as high rank as a very weak historical painter. The merit rests with the invention of the rules. Find then first the rules and regular disciplines of the painter, then compare his work with that of the sculptor, and see which is the most difficult.

'Tis certain that, all the rules of painting being known, the art has been made much easier. I know not that we can say as much for sculpture: we, indeed, see children amuse themselves with plaster, and making little figures, but they stand still at these beginnings.

## XXII.

In one respect he thought painting had the advantage over sculpture, and this is in the folds of the drapery. It is true, he said, that folks must always accommodate themselves to the motions of the person painted, especially to the form of the muscles, and the reason why they are so free and graceful in the works of Raphael, and of the ancient masters, is because they show distinctly the forms beneath them. This consideration is of equal importance to the painter and sculptor. But while the painter needs only to adapt his draperies to certain parts in his picture, because they are to be looked at only from a single point of view, and if they look well in front, it is no matter how they fall behind, the sculptor is obliged to arrange them with equal judgment behind and on every side. See how much the sculptor has to do, since he not only must adjust them with elegance to the movements of the person, but must show clearly where they begin, how they are extended, and where they ought to finish.

Let no one fancy that folds should all be of the same character. As the design of the human form varies with the character of each person, so ought the folds to vary according to the various characters of stuffs and persons.

The treatment of folds presents difficulties even to the greatest sculptors, because it is not with them as with the nude, where the data and principles are fixed in nature, and a careful study of these ensures success. But folds, oftentimes, depend on the occasion, or some accidental circumstance, and always on the taste, which differs with each man.

This study has no fixed rules; often the finest arrangement of folds comes from a happy combination seen on some person where it was the effect of accident. The best rule is to observe the momentary changes in the vestments of all persons whom we meet. Thus the life of the artist is a continued study; since he will often draw the highest benefit from observations made, while walking in the streets for his amusement.

## XXIII.

Talking one day about following out the rules with exactness, he said it was well to do so, since this prevented arbitrary and capricious proceedings; keeping the artist awake to his duty, but that nevertheless if he followed these rules in a servile spirit, the desired effect is not obtained, and, without effect, there cannot be the illusion so essential to art. A principal study among the ancients was how to obtain this effect, and to do this they would sacrifice rules; this was no oversight, but highest wisdom; since if, by an exact observation of what has been prescribed, the desired effect is not obtained, the artist misses his aim, and blasphemes the rules.

I do not intend this counsel for the young, for they should not desire to emancipate themselves from the discipline of art, and with them the attempt to do so would be a fatal error; but I speak thus to the great masters with whom such infractions display the best knowledge of art, of experience, of philosophy.

The Colossi of Monte Cavallo, seen near at hand, have eyes exaggerated, and somewhat distorted, and the mouth does not follow exactly the line of the eye, and it is this very thing which in the distance gives them so much expression. The Sibyls of Buonarrotti which are of supreme excellence in painting,

seen near, have frightful masses of shadow; the upper lip of a different impasto from the rest; yet, seen from the proper point of view, they are divine works. This it is to profess the skill of a master, but which is not to be attained, except by vast studies, and the practice given by great works.

#### XXIV.

Speaking of a young sculptor who had great disposition for art, but was hindered by a love of amusement, I pity said he, those young men who think to make pleasures of all sorts harmonize with art. Art alone must reign in all the thoughts of the sculptor; for this alone must he live, to this alone devote his every care. Otherwise the intellect is dissipated, the body exhausted, and the sculptor has more need of his physical forces than any other artist. How can he who is wearied out with late hours, with music and dancing, with suppers, come early in the morning to work in the studio, with that ardor which is needed? They grow indolent, and, with slothfulness, come indifference to glory and content with mediocrity.

#### XXV.

Enthusiasm is as much needed for the artist as for the poet; yet, to restrain the fire of those who delight overmuch in fanciful and luxurious inventions, he would add, he who abandons himself to this alone, will produce nothing worthy. Enthusiasm must be united to two other grand qualities, else it differs little from delirium; only when regulated by reason, and adapted to execution is it triumphant.

Three powers are to be satisfied in the spectator; the imagination, the reason, and the heart. Enthusiasm alone can, at best, only excite the imagination, which is the least noble, since madmen have it in great fulness. The reason can be satisfied only with what is conformable to reason, and the heart, with the expressive execution which convinces the senses.

#### XXVI.

Let the sculptor fix his attention on the head; fine heads are rare, were so even among the ancients; — traverse the great museum of the Vatican, and you will observe a poverty as to this eminent part of the person.

In working, he finished the head first, saying, to work less ill I want to find pleasure in it, and what pleasure could I have in working on a person, whose physiognomy did not stir my blood; how endure to converse with it three or four months. I should do all against my heart; the first requisite is that I should be pleased, nay, charmed with my subject; then I shall work on it with loving care, for we are naturally inclined to show courtesy to the beautiful rather than the ugly. Beauty awakens a spontaneous, impetuous affection, though ugliness may be borne with through education, through reflection. But see two boys crying, one beautiful, the other ugly; it is the beautiful one you will find yourself impelled to console. I seek first an invention as good as may be, so that this may inspire and give me courage for the rest, and, seeing it beautiful, or beautiful to my mind, for I dare not speak positively as to its being so, I say within myself, the beautiful countenance ought to have all the other parts correspond with it, it ought to be in an attitude, dressed in robes worthy of its beauty; thus that first ray lights me to the rest. And this appears to me the true philosophy, founded on the human heart.

#### XXVII.

Hearing exaggerated praise of certain artists, who have sought out violent motions for their subjects; I do not love, said he, these vehement motions, which are contrary to the sober and composed medium in which abides the beauty of all the imitative arts; to me also they seem easy, though the vulgar suppose them difficult, and I should rather exhibit that ease which artists know to be difficult.

Sculpture is only marble, until it has motion and life; now let us set ourselves to work, and see if it is not more difficult to impart soul to a part gently moved, and in quiet, than to one moved for an act that aids it to the semblance of life.

### XXVIII.

He was at work one day on the foot of a dancing nymph, and showed indefatigable patience in retouching it. Why do you give so much labor to these minutiae? said a friend to him. Already this statue is a divine image. Do you expect those who are enchanted with its beauty to pause and examine these trifles? Diligence, he replied, is what gives honor to our work. I labor here upon the nails. Among the things which are ordinarily neglected in art are the human nails, and yet the ancients took great pains to express them well. In the Venus de Medici they are admirably well done. Not without deep wisdom is that proverbial expression of the ancients, “perfect even to the nails,” to signify a complete work.

The ears too are often merely indicated, not finished out in detail; yet the shape of the ear has great influence on the human countenance, and we see them carefully executed in the best sculptures.

### XXIX.

How is it that you can be so calm beneath bitter censure? The Artist replied, I ought to be more grateful to my critics, than to those who praise me, even though the critics are sarcastic and unjust. It is easy to be lulled to sleep in art; praise conduces to this drowsiness, while censure keeps the artist awake, and fills him with a holy fear, so that he dares not abandon himself to license, to mannerism; it makes him eager to produce always better works. Plutarch says the unkind observation of enemies keeps us on our guard against errors, Antisthenes, that to plough a strait furrow, it needs to have true friends or violent enemies, since the enemy sees much which is concealed by affection from the friend.

### XXX.

Take a great illustrious revenge on your calumniators, by seeking to do better, constrain them to silence by your excellence; this is the true road to triumph. If you take the other, if you plead your cause, justify yourself, or make reprisals, you open for yourself a store of woes, and you lose the tranquility which you require for your works, and the time, is disputing, which should have been consecrated to labor.

### XXXI.

As I have shown in these memoirs, the virtue of Canova as a man was not unworthy his excellence as an artist. Artists, be said, are called Virtuosi; how then can they dare contradict by their actions the noble meaning of their art? The arts in themselves are divine; they are an emanation from the Supreme Beauty; they are one of the supports of Religion. If the artist has once fixed his mind on such great objects, I do not know how he can by his life disgrace this magnificent trust.

Beside, purity of heart, virginity of mind, have great influence on the artist, both as to dignity of conception, and means of execution. Artists paint themselves in their works. The courtesy, grace, benignity, disinterestedness, the enlarged and noble soul of Raphael, shine out marvellously in his works.

A portrait, said to be that of Correggio, was brought to Canova, when he wished to make his bust, but, as he saw there a coarse mind, with coarse features, he said, it cannot be that the painter of the graces could have worn such a semblance. And he was right; it was not the true portrait of Correggio. Seeing afterwards the true portrait, lo! said he, here is the one who could paint beautiful things.

### XXXII.

To one of the young men of his studio, who took offence at all nudity, who was scandalized at being set to work on the forms of men, if they were beautiful, and of women would not touch even the arms; he, disgusted by this absurd scrupulousness, I too abhor immodest works as I do sin, for an artist must in no way stain his honor; nor can vice ever be beautiful. Yet, since the nude is the language of art, it ought to be represented, but in a pure spirit. If you know not how to do this, if you have so base a mind as to bring the perversities of your own corruption into the discipline of the gentle arts, take some other path. Nudity is divine; bodies are the works of God himself; if he had not wished that any part should be as it is, he would not have made it so; all was at his will, of his omnipotence: we need not be ashamed to copy what he has made, but always in purity and with that veil of modesty, which indeed nature did not need in the innocence of first creation; but does so now in her perverted estate.

Licentiousness is not shown in the nudity of a form, but in the expression which a vicious artist knows how to throw into it; I think rather the unveiled form, shown in purity, adorned with exquisite beauty, takes from us all mortal perturbations, and transports us to the primal state of blessed innocence; and still more that it comes to us as a thing spiritual, intellectual; exalting the mind to the contemplation of divine things, which, as they cannot be manifested to the senses in their spiritual being, only through the excellence of forms can be indicated, and kindle us by their eternal beauty, and draw us from the perishable things of earth.

Where is the being so depraved who seeing forms of admirable beauty in Greek art, would feel corrupt desires, and not rather find himself ennobled and refined by the sight, and abashed in its presence at his own imperfection? This is why a perfect beauty is named ideal, because it is wholly a thing of the soul and not of the sense. Corrupt inclinations alone can lead to impure wishes at sight of a naked statue of exquisite beauty and of chaste expression; nor ought it to be believed, that the ancients, who revered virtue as a divinity, would so degrade the dignity of the mind as to indulge brutal desires, while they adored unveiled beauty.

### XXXIII.

There is no heart so hard that it can resist grace, tempered with dignity.

### XXXIV.

In reference to an artist of great aspiration but small success, because for many years he had pounded as in a mortar at art, without coming to any happy issue, he said  
steadfast perseverance must bring some improvement; but if nature has not herself launched us in the way we choose, perseverance alone will not avail.

If a young man does not dart forward with admirable progress, in the first three or four years, always provided he has the right principles, little, generally speaking, can be hoped from him afterwards. With time, he may, indeed, acquire more freedom in treatment, more knowledge of material, more learning, but not more originality, nor more development of genius.

The figure of Clemency, in the Ganganelli Mausoleum, was one of my earliest works, and I know not that, in the thirty years that intervene, I have learned to do better. I grieve to see my powers so circumscribed, and would wish to raise myself to a higher mark, but I do not succeed.

### XXXV.

He entertained so modest an opinion of himself that he repeated often, such an one praises me, but am I certain that I deserve it? I do not accept this praise, lest I perhaps usurp what does not belong to me; beside, I am always expecting that some boy will come forward, who shall put me quite in the shade.

### XXXVI

Speaking of the artist's obligation to express the affections of the mind, he said, our great ancient artists were admirable in what relates to the affections; with the progress of years reason has gained, but the heart has lost; this is perhaps the cause of the prevalent indifference to works of art; they address themselves so much to the reason, that the senses are not moved, the heart remains cold, nor is excited to emotion, even by the most commended works.

### XXXVII.

The artist, said he, laboring on the form, ought to fill it with modulations, which shall all be contained within the just limits of the outline of the whole; to this rule he added another drawn from observation of natural beauty, and of numerical proportions; that is, to work on all parts, regulating them constantly by the ternary correspondence. I mean, that each part, however small, must be composed of three parts; a greater, a lesser, and a least, so that they should coincide variously and insensibly to form that one part. This rule, he said, had led him to the resemblance of flesh, and to a truth in every part. This applies also to the arrangement of hair, the division of drapery; we must be guided in the execution of all by the scale of an invisible geometry.

### XXXVIII.

Canova bad applied a profound study to the comment made by Metastasio on the Poetics of Aristotle, and said he had learned more from this, than from all the masters of art.

As poetic diction should be pure, lucid, elegant, dignified, even so the statuary should not make use of a coarse and porous stone, but of the finest and hardest marble. The poet ought to have a rich, elevated, and enchanting style, and the sculptor the same, if they would not fail of the highest truth.

Those are the rabble and the dregs amid painters, who thinking the better to imitate nature, introduce into pictures on illustrious subjects the style of the taverns, and renounce the dignity of art, that is to say, its divine part, the ideal.

The sculptor must dispense entirely with ignoble, brutal forms, with him satyrs, Sileni, old people, and servants, if used, must each be ennobled by the beauty possible to its kind.

### XXXIX.

Aristotle gives the degrees of imitation as three; better, worse, and like, I mean imitations of objects which are better or worse than or like ourselves. He thought this might well be applied to art, for being minister of virtue, of beauty, and the ideal it should always elevate its subject; those are scarcely endurable who represent it just as it is; those abominable who deform and degrade it, that is to say, make it worse.

### XL.

From another opinion of Aristotle, that works of imitation please from the intimate feeling of complacence, which all have in their clear sightedness when they separate the true from the false even in imitation; he inferred that those artists are unwise who wish rather to make manifest all parts of their subject, than cause them to be divined. Those sculptors work against themselves, who, as it were, publish the anatomy, doing thus an injury to the self-love of the observer, who wishes to please himself with divining things, rather than see them inevitably.

### XLI.

Aristotle says all men have an irresistible desire for imitation.

Canova judges this maxim to be founded in human nature, and justified by experience; hence he inferred, that there neither is nor can be a people without art; they may have it in an imperfect shape, but

they will have it; thus artists have the great advantage of working on a foundation innate in nature, and are always sure to please, which is not the case with men of science, with philologists, to whose disciplines men have not so great a general tendency.

#### XLII.

Reading in the same that the poet is not obliged to observe historical fidelity, for the object of the historian is not to imitate, but only faithfully to recount events as they happened, and that of the poet to relate them as they might with verisimilitude have happened; he said, this is the law which, above every other, explains the beauty which is called ideal in art; since representing subjects not as they are, but as they ought to be, perfecting them and imparting to them that degree of nobleness, grace, excellence, of which they are capable, is to discern all their finest relations, and, by harmonizing these, form a type in our mind from the materials afforded by nature, and afterward verify it by the expression in art. Thus if the object of the imitation be, as is implied in the foregoing statement, to create a perfect type, those, who are satisfied with a common or vulgar model, fail of their object and their art, and should rather be called the disgrace of art, than artists. But those who are worthy its sublime disciplines, the true artists, are above the followers of other callings, however arduous, since others have permanent rules, independent of composition, which demands not only judgment, as all things do, but taste, inspiration, memory, and even creative energy.

#### XLIII.

As Cicero teaches that to produce emotion is the triumph of the orator, so, he said, is the introduction of passion into his works the triumph of the artist, and in this regard he was pleased with the other admonition that the inventor, while ordering his scene, ought to imagine himself in the event and passions he wishes to represent, even so far as to act them out by gesture ; it being very true that he who would move others must first be moved himself. So when he was modeling, you might have seen that he was invested with the passions of his subject by the changes of his countenance, by tears, joyousness, and agitation all over his body.

#### XLIV.

As execution is to works of art what elocution is to poetry, he said, even as the latter should be clear and noble, and in style the best and best arranged which be used, so art should choose the finest faces, the noblest forms, the most graceful drapery; the manner at once most easy and most dignified, most distinguished and most natural.

#### XLV.

He availed himself of criticisms from the multitude, for, said he, a work should please not only the learned, but the vulgar; that is to say, all men according to their capacity should find there what may move, delight and instruct them, as with the immortal poem of Tasso, which attracts the gondolier no less than the philosopher.

Thus he thought it well to exhibit his compositions before they were entirely finished; because, though the people cannot judge as to mastery in art, it can feel grace, approve truth, be penetrated by the effect, enchanted by beauty. The people is, ordinarily, less corrupt than any other judge; it is not biased by rivalry in genius, nor bigotry of schools, nor confusion of useless, false, ill understood, and ill applied precepts; it does not wish to display erudition, nor malice against the moderns, masked by idolatry for the ancients, nor any other of the baneful affections of the human heart, such as are fomented, oftentimes produced by learning, which is not ruled and purified by wisdom. Apropos to this he told the story from Lucian, that when Phidias was making his Jupiter for the Eleans, happening to be behind the

door, he heard the people talking about it; some found fault with this, some with that; when they were gone, Phidias retouched the parts in question, according to the opinion of the majority, for he did not hold lightly the opinion of so many people; thinking the many must see farther than one alone, even if that one be a Phidias.

#### XLVI.

Finally, said Canova, above all theory and attempt of human subtlety at division and metaphysics in matters of art, I esteem that remark in the same comment on Aristotle, that good judgment is the best rule, without which the best precepts are useless, or even pernicious. Of all which principles of Canova, I am the earnest champion; for with him I have read a hundred times those comments on Aristotle, and have felt for myself the application, which he made of them to art, and have registered them in my memory, to write them afterwards in leaves, which, perhaps, will not perish.

Thus far Missirini, affectionate and faithful, if not bold, and strong as the old Vasari! Such should be the friend of genius, manly to esteem, women to sympathize in, its life.

Reserving for another occasion the notice of various traits, which illustrate the position of Canova as an artist, we must hasten to an outline of his life, which is beautiful through its simplicity and steadfastness of aim, amid many conflicting interests, at an epoch of great agitation and temptation.

He was born at Possagno, a little town in the Venetian territory, 1757 and died at Venice, 1822. It illustrates the generosity of the world-spirit in our age, that, not content with giving us Bonaparte and Byron, Beethoven and Goethe, it should finish out and raise to conspicuous station a representative of a class so wholly different, and, at first glance, it might seem, so unlikely to be contemporary with the three former. The Goethean constellation, indeed, no life, and with all its aversion to "halfness" was propitious to limited natures like Canova, and no way so ardent for die artist, as not to appreciate the artisan. — For Canova, though in good measure the artist, was in highest perfection the artisan.

Though his life had no connexion with the great tendencies of his time, yet it has on that very account a certain grace and sweetness. Chosen as the sculptor of the Imperial Court, and highly favored by the Pope, he knew how to take his own path, and answer, in his own way, to all requisitions. His life was that of a gentleman and student; still and retired in the midst of convulsion, full and sweet in the midst of dread and anguish, it comes with a gentle and refreshing dignity to our thoughts. From princes and potentates he wished nothing but employment, and the honors they added had no importance in his eyes, though they were received with that courtesy and delicate propriety which marked all his acts, whether towards the high or low in the ranks of this world. To write in marble the best thoughts of his mind; to remain a faithful son and intelligent lover of his native country, to keep days devoted to the worship of beauty, unspotted as the material in which he expressed it, to lavish on his kindred by birth or spirit all the outward rewards of his labor, choosing for himself frugality of body, plenteousness of soul, — such was the plan of Canova's life; one from which he could not be turned aside, by any lure of ambition, or the sophistry of others about his duties. He never could be induced to assume responsibilities, for which he did not feel himself inwardly prepared;

though, when duly called to face a crisis, he showed self-possession, independence, and firmness.

It was by his intercourse with Napoleon, that his character was most tried, and here his attitude is very noble and attractive. He never defies the Emperor, but is equally sincere, energetic, and adroit in defending the rights he has at heart. It is pleasant to see the influence on Bonaparte, who, always imperious and sarcastic when braved is a vain and meddlesome temper, does full justice to that of Canova. Though he could not induce the sculptor to enter his service, either by marks of favor or glittering hopes, he was not angry, but on the contrary, attended to his recommendation by redressing the wrongs of Venice, and lending generous aid to the cause of art at Rome. In this, as in other instances, Napoleon showed that where he met a man of calm and high strain, he knew how to respect him; that if men were usually to him either tools or foes, it was not his fault only. — The Dialogues between Napoleon and Canova are well worth translation, but would occupy too much space here. They show, like other records of the time, the want of strict human affinity between the conquering mind and those it met. Even when they can stand their ground, he seems to see them, seize their leading traits, but never make a concord with them. He never answers to Canova's thought, and it is impossible to judge whether the oft repeated argument, that the works of art, which had been taken from Italy, could never be seen to the same purpose elsewhere, because no longer connected with the objects and influences that taught how to look at them, made any impression on his mind. If it had, he might with advantage have followed up the thought in its universal significance.

But wherever he turned his life, it was like the fire to burn, and not like the light to illustrate and bless.

This was one fine era in Canova's existence. One no less so was when, after the abdication of Bonaparte, the Allied Powers took possession of Paris. Then when partial restitution might be expected of the spoils which had been torn from the nations, by the now vanquished Lion, Rome redemanded the treasures of art, whose loss she had bemoaned in the very dust, the Niobe of nations, doubly bereft, since not only the temple of Jupiter Stator was overthrown, and his golden Victories dispersed among kingdoms, once her provinces, but the Apollo, emblem of the creative genius which had replaced the heroism of her youth, had been ravished from her. And she sent him, who of her children she deemed most favored by the God, to redemand him and his associate splendors.

The French would not do themselves the honor of a free acquiescence in this most just demand; the other powers were unwilling to interfere, with the exception of England, who, moved scarce less by respect for the envoy, than sense of the justice of the demand, interposed with such decision, that the Prince of Art was permitted to resume his inheritance. The Duke of Wellington, with a martial frankness and high sense of right, which nobly became him, declared his opinion, afterwards published in the *Journal des Debats*, "that the allied powers should not yield to the wishes of the French King in this matter. That so to do would be *impolitic*, since they would thus lose the opportunity of giving France a great moral lesson."

Such views of policy might, indeed, convince that the victory of Waterloo came by ministry of Heaven. Had but the Holy Allies kept this thought holy!

England not only assisted Canova with an armed force to take away the objects he desired, but supplied a large sum to restore them to their native soil, and replace them on their former pedestals.

There is something in the conduct of this affair more like the splendid courtesy of chivalrous times, than the filching and pinching common both in court and city at this present time. The generosity of England, the delicacy of Canova, who took upon himself to leave with the French monarch many masterpieces, mindful rather of his feelings, and respect for his position, than of his injustice, (though this injustice was especially unpardonable, since having been long despoiled himself of all he called his own, readiness to restore their dues to others might have been expected at this crisis, even from a Bourbon,) the letters of the Pope and Cardinal Gonsalvi, overflowing no less with gratitude than affection, the Pope thanking Canova for having not only fulfilled his intentions but "understood his heart," (in the delicacy shown towards France,) the recognition on all sides of the honors due to the artist, the splendid rewards bestowed by the Papal court, which Canova employed wholly for the aid and encouragement of poor or young artists, all this reminds us rather of Fairy queens, with boundless bounty for the worthy, boundless honor for the honorable, and self-denial alike admirable in rich and poor, rather than modern snuffbox times of St. James or the Tuilleries.

The third and last fair fact in Canova's life was the erection of the temple at Possagno, of which an account is given in the following extract, from the journal of a traveller: —

"At sunset, I found myself on the summit of a ridge of rocks; it was the last of the Alps. Before my feet stretched out the Venetian territory. Between the plain and the peak from which I contemplated it was a beautiful oval valley, leaning on one side against the Alps, on the other elevated like a terrace above the plain, and protected against the sea breeze by a rampart of fertile hills. Directly below me lay a village scattered over the declivity in picturesque disorder. This poor hamlet is crowned with a vast and beautiful temple of marble, perfectly new, shining in virgin whiteness, and seated proudly on the mountain ridge. It had to me an air of personal existence. It seemed to contemplate Italy, unrolled before it like a map, and to command it.

"A man, who was cutting marble on the mountain side, told me that this church of pagan form was the work of Canova, and that the village below was Possagno, his birth place. Canova, added the mountaineer, was the son of a stone cutter, a poor workman like me.

"The valley of Possagno has the form of a cradle, and is in the proportion of the stature of the man who went out from it. It is worthy to have produced more than one genius; it is conceivable that the height of intellect should be easily developed in a country so beautiful and beneath so pure a heaven. The transparency of the waters, the richness of the soil, the force of vegetation, the beauty of the race in that part of the Alps, and the magnificence of the distant views which the valley commands on all sides, seem made to nourish the highest faculties of the soul, and to excite to the noblest ambition. This kind of terrestrial paradise, where intellectual youth can expand into the fulness of spring; this immense horizon, which seems to invite the steps and the thoughts of the future, are they not two principal conditions necessary to unfold a fair destiny?

"The life of Canova was fertile and generous as his native soil. Sincere and simple as a true mountaineer, he loved always with a tender predilection the village and poor dwelling where he was born. He had it embellished very modestly, and came there in autumn to rest from the labors of the year. He took pleasure at these times in drawing the Herculean forms of the men, and the truly Grecian heads of the young girls. The inhabitants of Possagno say with pride, that the principal models of the rich

collection of Canova's works came from their valley. In fact you need only pass through it, to meet at each step the type of that cold beauty which characterizes the statuary of the empire. The principal charm of these peasant women is precisely one which marble could not reproduce, the freshness of coloring and transparency of the skin. To them might without exaggeration be applied the eternal metaphor of lilies and roses. Their liquid eyes have an uncertain tint, at once green and blue, like the stone called Aqua-marine. Canova delighted in the *morbidezza* of their heavy and abundant locks of fair hair. He used to comb them himself, before copying them, and to arrange their tresses, after the various styles of the Greek marbles.

"These girls generally possess that expression of sweetness and naïveté which, reproduced in fairer lineaments and more delicate forms, inspired Canova with his delightful head of Psyche. The men have a colossal head, prominent forehead, thick fair hair, eyes large, animated, and bold, and short square face. Without anything profound or delicate in their physiognomy, there is an expression of frankness and courage which reminds us of an ancient hunter.

"The temple of Canova is an exact copy of the Pantheon at Rome. The material is a beautiful marble, of a white ground, streaked with red, — but rather soft, and already marked by the frost.

Canova caused the erection of this church with the benevolent object of presenting an attraction to strangers to visit Possagno, and thus giving a little commerce and prosperity to the poor inhabitants of the Mountain. It was his intention to make it a sort of museum for his works. Here were to be deposited the sacred subjects from his hand, and the upper galleries would have contained some of the profane subjects. He died, leaving his plan unfinished, and bequeathed a considerable sum for this object. But although his own brother, the Bishop of Canova, had it in charge to oversee the works, a sordid economy or signal bad faith presided over the execution of the last will of the Sculptor. With the exception of the marble *vaisseau*, which it was too late to speculate about, the necessary furnishings are all of the meanest kind. Instead of the twelve colossal marble statues, which were to have occupied the twelve niches of the cupola, you see twelve grotesque giants, executed by a painter, who, they say, knew well enough how to do better, but travestied his work to avenge himself for the sordid shifts of his employers. But few specimens of Canova's work adorn the interior of the monument; a few bas-reliefs of small size, but of pure and elegant design, are incrusted in the walls of the chapels. — There are copies also in the Academy of the Fine Arts at Venice, with one of which I was particularly struck. In the same place is the group of Christ at the Tomb, which is certainly the coldest invention of Canova—the bronze cast of this group in the temple at Possagno, as well as the tomb which encloses the remains of the Sculptor. It is a Grecian Sarcophagus, — very simple and beautiful, executed after his designs.

"Another group, of Christ at the threshold, painted in oil, decorates the chief altar. Canova, the most modest of Sculptors, had the ambition to be a painter also. — He retouched this picture from time to time during several years, — happily the only offspring of his old age, — which affection for his virtues and regard for his fame ought to induce his heirs to keep concealed from every eye."

To this purpose he devoted the riches he had earned by his works. That he should, even with his celebrity and the end of so laborious a life, possess a fortune adequate to so vast an enterprise was, and is, a matter of wonder, and only to be explained by the severe simplicity of his habits. With deep regret we learn that he died too soon to ensure the fulfilment of his plan. A wish so pure deserved that he should find a worthy executor.

To sum up decisively, if not fully, Canova shines before us in as unblemished purity of morals, tenderness and fidelity toward friends, generosity to rivals, gentleness to all men, a wise and modest estimate of himself, an unfailing adequacy to the occasion, adorned by fineness of

breeding in all his acts and words. — He is no life-renewing fountain, but we will think of him with a well assured pleasure, as a green island of pure waters, and graceful trees in the midst of a dark and turbulent stream.

---

---

Author's Notes:

1. He does not seem to have clearly seen that the good sense of genius is the equipoise of perfected faculties, and should be distinguished by the thinker from the good sense of common men, which expresses only the experience of past ages.
- 
- 

Source: *The Dial*, Vol. III, No. IV. April 1843, pp. 454-483

---