

The more refined our taste grows from the *study of nature*, the more insipid are the *works of art*. Few of it's efforts please. The idea of the great original is so strong, that the copy must be pure, if it do not disgust. But the varieties of nature's charts are such, that, study them as we can, new varieties will always arise: and let our taste be ever so refined, her works, on which it is formed (at least when we consider them as *objects*,) must always go beyond it; and furnish fresh sources both of pleasure and amusement.

(1792)

MONTHLY MAGAZINE
*On Artificial Taste*¹

To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine.

SIR,

A TASTE for rural scenes, in the present state of society, appears to me to be very often an artificial sentiment, rather inspired by poetry and romances, than a real perception of the beauties of nature; but, as it is reckoned a proof of refined taste to praise the calm pleasure which the country affords, the theme is exhausted; yet, it may be made a question, whether this romantic kind of declamation has much effect on the conduct of those who leave, for a season, the crowded cities in which they were bred.

I have been led into these reflections by observing, when I have resided for any length of time in the country, how few people seem to contemplate

nature with their own eyes. I have "brushed the dew away"² in the morning; but, pacing over the printless grass, I have wondered that, in such delightful situations, the sun was allowed to rise in solitary majesty, whilst my eyes alone hailed its beautifying beams. The webs of the evening have still been spread across the hedged path, unless some labouring man, trudging to work, disturbed the fairy structure; yet, in spite of this supineness, on joining the social circle, every tongue rang changes on the pleasures of the country.

Having frequently had occasion to make the same observation, in one of my solitary rambles, I was led to endeavour to trace the cause, and likewise to enquire why the poetry, written in the infancy of society, is most natural: which, strictly speaking (for natural is a very indefinite expression) is merely to say, that it is the transcript of immediate emotions, when fancy, awakened by the view of interesting objects, in all their native wildness and simplicity, was most actively at work. At such moments, sensibility quickly furnishes similes, and the sublimated spirits combine with happy facility—images, which spontaneously bursting on him, it is not necessary coldly to ransack the understanding or memory, till the laborious efforts of judgment exclude present sensations, and damp the fire of enthusiasm.

The effusions of a vigorous mind will, nevertheless, ever inform us how far the faculties have been enlarged by thought, and stored with knowledge. The richness of the soil even appears on the surface; and the result of profound thinking often mixing with playful grace in the reveries of the poet, smoothly incorporates with the ebullitions of animal spirits, when the finely-fashioned nerve vibrates acutely with rapture, or when relaxed by soft melancholy, a pleasing languor prompts the long-drawn sigh, and feeds the slowly falling tear.

¹ This article, by Mary Wollstonecraft, appeared anonymously in the *Monthly Magazine* in April 1797 (3: 279–82). Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, reprinted it with the title "On Poetry and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature" in *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798.

² Source unidentified.

The poet, the man of strong feelings, only gives us a picture of his mind when he was actually alone, conversing with himself, and marking the impression which nature made on his own heart. If, during these sacred moments, the idea of some departed friend—some tender recollection, when the soul was most alive to tenderness, intruded unawares into his mind, the sorrow which it produced is artlessly, but poetically, expressed; and who can avoid sympathizing?

Love of man leads to devotion. Grand and sublime images strike the imagination. God is seen in every floating cloud, and comes from the misty mountain to receive the noblest homage of an intelligent creature—praise. How solemn is the moment, when all affections and remembrances fade before the sublime admiration which the wisdom and goodness of God inspires, when he is worshiped in a temple not made with hands,¹ and the world seems to contain only the mind that formed and contemplates it! These are not the weak responses of ceremonial devotion; nor to express them would the poet need another poet's aid. No: his heart burns within him, and he speaks the language of truth and nature, with resistless energy.

Inequalities, of course, are observable in his effusions; and a less vigorous imagination, with more taste, would have produced more elegance and uniformity. But as passages are softened or expunged, during the cooler moments of reflection, the understanding is gratified at the expence of those involuntary sensations which like the beautiful tints of an evening sky, are so evanescent, that they melt into new forms before they can be analyzed. For, however eloquently we may boast of our reason, man must often be delighted he cannot tell why, or his blunt feelings are not made to relish the beauties which nature, poetry, or any of the imitative arts afford.

It would be a philosophical enquiry, and throw some light on the history of the human mind, to trace, as far as our information will allow us, the spontaneous feelings and ideas which have produced the images that now frequently appear unnatural, because they are remote, and disgusting, because they have been servilely copied by poets, whose habits of thinking, and views of nature must have been different; for the understanding seldom disturbs the current of our present feelings without dissipating the gay clouds which fancy has been embracing; yet, it silently gives the colour to the whole tenor of them, and the reverie is over when truth is grossly violated, or imagery introduced, selected from books, and not from local manners, or popular prejudices.

In a more advanced state of civilization, a poet is rather a creature of art, than of nature; the books that he peruses in his youth, become a hot-bed, in which artificial fruits are produced, beautiful to the common eye, though they want the true hue and flavour. His images do flow from his imagination, but are servile copies; and, like the works of the painters who copy ancient statues when they draw men and women of their own times, we acknowledge that the features are fine, and the proportions just, but still they are men of stone: insipid figures, that never convey to the mind the idea of a portrait taken from the life, where the soul gives spirit and homogeneity to the whole form. The silken wings of fancy are shrivelled by rules, and a desire of attaining elegance of diction occasions an attention to words, incompatible with sublime impassioned thoughts.

A boy of abilities, who has been taught the structure of verse at school, and been roused by emulation to compose rhymes whilst he was reading works of genius, may, by practice, produce pretty verses, and even become what is often termed an elegant poet. But though it should be allowed that

¹ Revelation 21:22.

books conned at school may lead some youths to write poetry, I fear they will never be the poets who charm our cares to sleep, or extort admiration. They may diffuse taste, and polish the language, but I am apt to conclude that they will seldom have the energy to rouse the passions which amend the heart.

And, to return to the first object of discussion, the reason why most people are more interested by a scene described by a poet, than by a view of nature, probably arises from the want of a lively imagination. The poet contrasts the prospect, and, selecting the most picturesque part in his camera,¹ the judgment is directed, and the whole attention of the languid faculty turned towards the objects which excited the most forcible emotions in the poet's heart, firing his imagination; the reader consequently feels the enlivened description, though he was not able to receive a first impression from the operations of his own mind.

Besides, it may be further observed, that uncultivated minds are only to be moved by forcible representations. To rouse the thoughtless, objects must be contrasted, calculated to excite tumultuous emotions. The unsubstantial picturesque forms which a contemplative man gazes on, and often follows with ardour till mocked by a glimpse of unattainable excellence, appear to them the light vapours of a dreaming enthusiast, who gives up the substance for the shadow. It is not within that they seek amusement—their eyes are rarely turned on themselves; of course, their emotions, though sometimes fervid, are always transient, and the nicer perceptions which distinguish the man of taste are not felt, or make such a slight impression as scarcely to excite any pleasurable sensations. Is it surprising,

then, that fine scenery often overlooked by those who yet may be delighted by the same imagery concentrated and contrasted by the poet? But even this numerous class is exceeded by wittlings, who, anxious to appear to have wit and taste, do not allow their understandings or feelings any liberty: for instead of cultivating their faculties, and reflecting on their operations, they are busy collecting prejudices, and are pre-determined to admire what the suffrage of time announces excellent; not to store up a fund of amusement for themselves, but to enable them to talk.

These hints will assist the reader to trace some of the causes why the beauties of nature are not forcibly felt, when civilization and its canker-worm, luxury, have made considerable advances. Those calm emotions are not sufficiently lively to serve as a relaxation to the voluptuary, or even for the moderate pursuers of artificial pleasures. In the present state of society, the understanding must bring back the feelings to nature, or the sensibility must have attained such native strength, as rather to be sharpened than destroyed by the strong exercise of passions.

That the most valuable things are liable to the greatest perversion, is, however, as trite as true. For the same sensibility, or quickness of senses, which makes a man relish the charms of nature, when sensation, rather than reason, imparts delight, frequently makes a libertine of him, by leading him to prefer the tumult of love, a little refined by sentiment, to the calm pleasure of affectionate friendship, in whose sober satisfactions reason, mixing her tranquillizing convictions, whispers that content, not happiness, is the reward, or consequence, of virtue in this world.

W.Q.
(1797)

¹ Camera obscura, a darkened chamber or box used to form an image of external images on paper placed at the focus of a double convex lens.