

**THE ROUND TABLE: A
COLLECTION OF ESSAYS
ON LITERATURE, MEN,
AND MANNERS, VOL. II**

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The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners, Vol. II by William Hazlitt

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WILLIAM HAZLITT

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ON

LITERATURE, MEN, AND MANNERS,

By WILLIAM HAZLITT.

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THE ROUND TABLE.

No. XXVII.

ON BEAUTY.

IT is about sixty years ago that Sir Joshua Reynolds, in three papers which he wrote in the *Idler*, advanced the notion, which has prevailed very much ever since, that Beauty was entirely dependant on custom, or on the conformity of objects to a given standard. Now, we could never persuade ourselves that custom, or the association of ideas, though a very powerful, was the only principle of the preference which the mind gives to certain objects over others. Novelty is surely one source of pleasure; otherwise we cannot account for the well-known epigram, beginning—

“Two happy things in marriage are allowed,” &c.

Nor can we help thinking, that, besides custom, or

the conformity of certain objects to others of the same general class, there is also a certain conformity of objects to themselves, a symmetry of parts, a principle of proportion, gradation, harmony, (call it what you will,) which makes certain things naturally pleasing or beautiful, and the want of it the contrary.

We will not pretend to define what Beauty is, after so many learned authors have failed ; but we shall attempt to give some examples of what constitutes it, to shew that it is in some way inherent in the object, and that if custom is a second nature, there is another nature which ranks before it. Indeed, the idea that all pleasure and pain depend on the association of ideas is manifestly absurd : there must be something in itself pleasurable or painful, before it could become possible for the feelings of pleasure or pain to be transferred by association from one object to another.

Regular features are generally accounted handsome ; but regular features are those, the outlines of which answer most nearly to each other, or undergo the fewest abrupt changes. We shall attempt to explain this idea by a reference to the Greek and African face ; the first of which is beautiful, because it is made up of lines corresponding with or melting into each other : the last

is not so, because it is made up almost entirely of contradictory lines and sharp angular projections.

The general principle of the difference between the two heads is this:—The forehead of the Greek is square and upright, and, as it were, overhangs the rest of the face, except the nose, which is a continuation of it almost in an even line. In the Negro or African, the tip of the nose is the most projecting part of the face; and from that point the features retreat back, both upwards towards the forehead, and downwards to the chin. This last form is an approximation to the shape of the head of the animal, as the former bears the strongest stamp of humanity.

The Grecian nose is regular, the African irregular. In other words, the Grecian nose seen in profile forms nearly a straight line with the forehead, and falls into the upper lip by two curves, which balance one another: seen in front, the two sides are nearly parallel to each other, and the nostrils and lower part form regular curves, answering to one another, and to the contours of the mouth. On the contrary, the African pug-nose is more “like an ace of clubs.” Whichever way you look at it, it presents the appearance of a triangle. It is narrow, and drawn to a point at top—broad and flat at bottom. The point is peaked,

and recedes abruptly to the level of the forehead or the mouth, and the nostrils are as if they were drawn up with hooks towards each other. All the lines cross each other at sharp angles. The forehead of the Greeks is flat and square, till it is rounded at the temples; the African forehead, like the ape's, falls back towards the top, and spreads out at the sides, so as to form an angle with the cheek-bones. The eyebrows of the Greeks are either strait, so as to sustain the lower part of the tablet of the forehead, or gently arched, so as to form the outer circle of the curves of the eyelids. The form of the eyes gives all the appearance of orbs, full, swelling, and involved within each other; the African eyes are flat, narrow at the corners, in the shape of a tortoise, and the eyebrows fly off slantwise to the sides of the forehead. The idea of the superiority of the Greek face in this respect is admirably expressed in Spenser's description of Belphebe :

" Her ivory forehead, full of bounty brave,
Like a broad table did itself dispread,
For love therein his triumphs to engrave,
And write the battles of his great Godhead.

* * * * *

" Upon her eyelids many Graces sat,
Under the shadow of her even brows."