

PART IV: THE CHAIN OF BEAUTY

CHAPTER TEN: ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

Politeness precedes the epistemological account of beauty because of the violence which a building necessarily inflicts on its surroundings and the violence which architecture necessarily inflicts upon its model: nature. The structure of the rest of the argument, however, remains faithful to the perceived natural order of the brain, the organisation of which proceeds from the sensual to the intellectual. It is essentially a Platonic hierarchy, distantly modelled on the allegory of the cave, although more immediately on Reynolds' recommendations concerning responsible pedagogy:

It is the natural progress of instruction to teach first what is obvious and perceptible to the sense, and from hence proceed gradually to notions large, liberal

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*and complete, such as comprise the more refined and higher excellences in art.*¹

That is the motto to the second chapter of Garbett's *Treatise*. The next section of this dissertation, composed of five chapters in all, will follow Garbett's anabatic progress towards architectural perfection.

Because Garbett sees politeness as an act of compensation, it is called a negative art which seeks to neutralise positive wrongs. Therefore politeness is fundamental to the reform that architecture is being subjected to. Only when its inherent social evils are neutralised can the architect proceed with the next step whereby the negative art of avoiding offence is transformed into the positive art of pleasing. This account needs to begin with an account of Garbett's epistemology, beginning with

1. Reynolds (1907) p.129. quoted by Garbett as the motto for his second chapter.

a discussion of Alison's influence on Garbett. Chapter 12, is concerned with following out the normative implications of that epistemology and discusses some of Garbett's axiomatic rules for architects and tries to clarify his stand on many of the aesthetic issues which occupied contemporary architectural thought. Chapter 13 is devoted to Garbett's discussion of the concept of imitation in the first part of the fourth chapter of the *Treatise*. While chapters 14 to 16 are concerned with the highest of architectural beauties, namely those of purity, truth and poetry.

The natural versus the acquired

Garbett's *Treatise* is subject to a continuous process of cell division. As the theory unfolds in greater detail, it progressively undermines his first, very inclusive definition of architecture. This is because Garbett is a child of his times and spends much of his time in trying to out-manoeuvre the less savoury implications of that original inclusiveness, qualifying it by reasserting a more

conventional system of oppositions and divisions in value. Ultimately this process would undermine his theory as a whole. His philosophy of perception became so heavily polluted with the familiar hierarchies in value that it undermined much of its original radicalism and consistency.

The separation between cookery, perfumery and architecture, for example, is allowed on the rather strange assumption that architecture can express an emotion and perfumery cannot. To enforce the division while trying to forestall anyone raising obvious objections to his apparent lack of logical consistency he writes:

*We must not confound essential differences of expression with those which arise accidentally from our associations.*²

He used the smell of vinegar as an example of an accidental association

2. *Treatise*, p. 24.

which naturally reminded the nineteenth century of illness and the sick-bed.

Garbett's use of the association of ideas in his theories of expression places him firmly within a British empirical tradition which stretches from Hobbes & Locke, via David Hartley to Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* which was first published in Edinburgh in 1790.³ It was not until the second expanded edition of 1811 appeared that the *Essay* achieved the revolutionary thrust in British thinking as

3. Alison (1811) intr.: *...while we feel the Emotions they [qualities] excite, we are ignorant of the causes by which they are produced; and when we seek to discover them we have no other method of discovery than that varied and patient experiment, by which, amid these complicated circumstances, we may gradually ascertain the peculiar qualities which, by the constitution of our Nature, are permanently connected with the emotions we feel.*

the hitherto most rigorous, systematic and complete attempt to apply the doctrine of association to aesthetics.⁴ Garbett's careful and lengthy critique of Alison's ideas attempted to translate the latter's phenomenological philosophy to his own normative purposes. This raised a number of problems, largely because of a fundamental difference in attitude between the two thinkers.

For Alison the attempt to find an objective standard of beauty was *altogether impossible*.⁵ That made it easy for Alison to come to terms with the subjectivity which associationism encourages. For Garbett on the other hand an objective standard was essential. His ultimate aim, like Hogarth, was *to fix our fluctuating ideas of taste*. Garbett needed at least the possibility of an

4. Beardsley (1975) p. 203; cf. also Hipple (1957) chapter on Alison; Kallich (1948) pp. 314-24.

5. Alison (1825) I, p. 316. I was first given the reference by Beardsley (1975) p. 205.

objective, or a widely intersubjective standard of beauty. Otherwise his theory would be useless.

He found that possibility in two principles discussed by Reynolds' in his Seventh Discourse.⁶ The first was the principle of univocality, i.e. the need to *fix* language which has already been discussed in an earlier chapter. The second was an idea which had been launched by Leonardo da Vinci but has a Greek pedigree, namely the majority vote, or, the idea of universal consensus: If the greater number of cultivated and educated minds agreed, then the question as to whether a thing was beautiful or not was adequately decided. Univocality in turn allows the idea that the process of personal cultivation naturally leads to consensus.

Alison was much more of a relativist than Garbett, and not concerned with the normative application of his doctrine. As such Alison could afford to be logically

6. Sir Joshua Reynolds (1907) pp. 91-118.

consistent and did not need to worry about the social implications of his semantics. Alison sought to understand what made our tastes fluctuate, frequently spotting exceptions to his own assertions about the character of forms.⁷

The basis of Alison's aesthetics was the proposition that the pleasures of taste or the enjoyment of beauty, occur when the imagination is employed in the prosecution of a regular train of ideas of emotion.⁸ An object to be considered aesthetically had to initiate a train of associations which in turn had to be productive of definite emotions. Any normative application of associationist aesthetics to a particular design problem had to try and find ways of conventionalising the experience of

7. Garbett was often upset at Alison's modesty, arguing that where Alison saw an exception to one of his theory, there was in fact none. For example see *Treatise*, p. 68.

8. Alison (1825) Essay. 1 Chap. 1, Sec. 1.

beauty, so as to make it subject to academic *reconstruction*. The subjective fluidity of such a train of thought, which allowed much of the sensation of beauty to be dependent on arbitrary collisions of thought had to be cleared out of the way. As we have seen, Garbett did recognise that the conventionalisation of beauty could not reside in the provision of conventional models which the architect could copy. Instead he wanted to concentrate on the formulation of axioms which could generalise the salient features of a model into a set of attitudes or principles of design. These could then take account of the variations in circumstances which would make the copying of a particular model within a different context inappropriate.

Because of Alison's definition of beauty, associationism has a way of running away with itself. Resemblances could attach themselves to wholly inappropriate and ephemeral models, thereby creating categories which could not be sustained. Garbett used the

illustration of Charles Barry's *Club Style* to illustrate the problem.

The *Companion to the British Almanak* for 1846 once criticised a particular domestic building for having *in its general aspect quite as much or even more of the club house than of the ordinary villa character*.⁹ What we have to observe here, replies Garbett impatiently, is the *singular force of association, by which the use of [the Florentine] manner in two London club-houses suffices to stamp it forthwith as a sort of club-house style*.¹⁰

The problem for Garbett was to identify the cause of such accidents of expression and provide them with a well-defined place within his system so as to keep them under control. The expressive possibilities of a building could, he thought, be controlled by consciously differentiating in

9. *Treatise*, p. 24-25. quoted from *The Companion to the British Almanak for 1846*, p.243. Another example is taken from the 1849 edition, p. 238.

10. *Treatise*, p. 25.

the design between the extrinsic and intrinsic character of forms.

Garbett believed that colours, sounds and forms could in themselves produce pleasant sensations, i.e. they could excite a sensual pleasure, without reference to experience. Their expressive beauty, on the other hand, arose from their value as stimuli of particular associations. In order to be able to reconstruct beauty, however, one needed permanently valid associations.

To avoid this problem then, another unfortunate dualism in logic, already suggested by Alison, was *fixed* by Garbett. This dualism was eased into a precarious existence by Garbett's insistence on there being two forms of expression, one acquired, the other natural. It is specifically the idea of a natural expression which would sound dubious in today's intellectual climate. Accidental expression, was based on accidental associations. Natural

expression was caused by natural associations, on *things permanently true*.¹¹

*I do not mean to imply that time-hallowed associations (such as that, for instance, which connects the Gothic style with our religious edifices) are to be wantonly broken through; only that, when any such are proved to be mere associations, they may (though still respected) not be suffered for a moment to have preference before such as may have been proved to be not accidental, but essential.*¹²

The explanation for this dualism is derived from Reynolds' Seventh Discourse. Ultimately the dichotomy can be traced back to Locke's chapter on the association of ideas:

Some of our ideas have a natural correspondence one with another: it is the office and excellency of our reason to

11. *Treatise*, p. 25.

12. *Treatise*, p. 25.

*trace these, and hold them together in that union and correspondence which is founded in their peculiar beings. Besides this there is another connection of ideas wholly owing to chance and custom.*¹³

This passage anticipated Garbett's distinction between natural and acquired expression. The way Reynolds applied Locke's ideas to the theory of art produced the highly significant and influential division between Raphael and Rembrandt in English art theory.

Raphael versus Rembrandt, Part I

Reynolds distinguished two forms of truth. The first was characterised by uniformity and predictability. The second was variable and arbitrary. The first was demonstrable, based upon *the laws of nature*. The second was experiential and sought out the many variations that nature saw fit to produce. For some

13. Locke "Of the Association of Ideas," *Essay*, II, xxxiii, 3.

unexplained reason these variations were not subject to *the laws of nature* beyond the fact that they were thought to be there only in order to confirm *the infinite variety of the creation*. The first is represented by the idealising and androgenising Raphael, the second by the particularising and psychologising Rembrandt. Raphael painted permanent types, Rembrandt represented individuals; Raphael therefore stands for everything permanent, Rembrandt for everything ephemeral; they have become the Parmenides and Heraclitus of aesthetics.

Garbett allies his accidental or Rembrandtesque associations to Reynolds' secondary truths, or *truths upon sufferance, or truth by courtesy*.

*These are to be respected in proportion to [their] stability or duration, or as their influence is more or less extensive, but never allowed to supersede real immutable TRUTH.*¹⁴

14. *Treatise*, p. 25-26; Reynolds (1907) p. 97

The Greeks did not want to produce statues of men but of mankind.¹⁵ Despite the contemporary despair concerning the possibility of objectivity in aesthetics, Garbett held on to the idea of absolute values like Don Quichote held on to his paranoid chivalry. Associationism, as had been Locke's great fear, could, if allowed to, start to lead its own life creating a perverse imaginative world of eclectic monsters. This was the reason that Garbett needed to control the power of associationism by separating its desirable aspects from the undesirable ones. This instituted a division which distantly resembled the conceptual division between long and short-term memories, between, let us say cerebral and genetic memory. The difference in accidental association and permanent association is the difference between the individuals of a species and the species in a generic sense.

The need for such a difference was created by the belief that that which had

permanence came from within and was the result of natural processes allowed to go their own way unhindered, while the particular was determined from without and suffered passively by the object through *the force* of circumstance. This theme returns in a different disguise when we discuss the explanation of the expression of power and delicacy.

The difference between natural and acquired expression may be illustrated by way of the metaphysical gap imposed by man, between himself (that is civilisation, culture) and nature. True associations are natural, acquired associations were thought to belong peculiarly to culture. Perhaps this meant no more than that natural associations conformed to Garbett's personal interpretation of Nature's language of symbols, which was itself a manifestation of culture. But one that Garbett did not recognise as such. Natural associations were seen to conform to an interpretation of nature as significant and purposive. Acquired associations differed in that they

15. *Treatise*, p. 23.

appeared to rest on more arbitrary collisions of resemblance and therefore were not able to signify more than the remarkableness of the coincidence or the moulding activity of external circumstance. A cloud in the shape of an animal, a tree contorted to resemble an evil face, that is what Garbett meant with accidental associations. In this the difference between true and acquired expression bore much similarity to Coleridge's argument for the distinction between imagination and fancy.¹⁶

On this basis Garbett rejected the possibility of Blondel's version of an *architecture parlante*, which has to be based on cultural conventions which can have no basis in natural processes:

To distinguish a club-house from a mansion is beyond the province of expression in any art. It is not to be done by expression, but only by language, and architecture does not pretend to be

16. Willey (1972).

phonetic. If you want to distinguish the destinations of these buildings, the best way is by writing up their names. (...) You may make a language of anything, -rustic quoins, Gothic windows,- provided people will agree to understand them alike, and take this for church and that for club-house; but what is the advantage of substituting a new and extremely limited language, understood by very few, for an established and incomparably more copious language, understood by the whole nation? It is harmless, of course, in itself,-merely an innocent pastime; but it is by no means harmless if it usurp the place of artistic expression,- of that which alone distinguishes a fine from an ornamental art, the architect from the decorator.¹⁷

Garbett did subscribe to the notion that expression can supplement a building's destination. Emotions, like smells and tastes can be reduced to a number of simple varieties. A successful building would not attempt to mix the several

17. *Treatise*, p. 27-28.

possible emotions too much. But to deny the possibility of combining an emotion with a destination was a fallacy. Garbett chastised the author of the article on architecture in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, for writing such things as: "The Merit or demerit of a composition is not at all affected by the use to which the edifice is applied."¹⁸ This is followed by something which really gets Garbett's bile flowing: "Moreover, there is nothing in any one 'order' that, were it not for custom, would not be thought fitting in any other, as in that to which it may belong."¹⁹

Perhaps not to Londoners, replies Garbett working himself up into a sublime anger, -utterly deadened to this art, and rendered incapable of ever understanding it, by the atrocious misapplications of its forms, perpetually before their eyes, -they might see no harm in a Doric entablature placed on Corinthian columns; but it would not on that account be a less flagrant violation of the immutable principles of right and wrong, -it would not be less

18. *Treatise*, p. 28. Quoted from the entry "Architecture," in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 7th ed., 1830-1842.

19. *Ibidem*.

unnatural than combining the parts of different animals, or joining the head of a Hercules to the body of an Apollo. (...) [The] majority has testified to the existence of expression in architecture, independently of all associations; and all minds educated and cultivated in the subject bear the same testimony, and find the same peculiar expressions in the same buildings; whether grave or festive, meek or ostentatious, awful or playful, majestic, reposing, agitate, or aspiring."²⁰

Oh, says Garbett's imagined objector: "Then a special education and culture is necessary, is it, in order to perceive these differences in character? Your distinctions, after all, then, are only conventional signs, only a kind of symbolism or heraldry, or free-masonry, intelligible to the initiated and to no one else."²¹

No. says Garbett, trying desperately to keep his plea for objective standards in tact by applying to Rousseauist variations of intellectual primitivism. No education,

20. *Treatise*, p. 28-29.

21. *Treatise*, p. 29.

he writes, is necessary to feel the expressiveness of our art:

Give us the mind wholly uneducated in [architecture]; give us the rustic or the child, unused to cities, uncorrupted by the sight of abused architecture, and he shall be awed by the sublime majesty of the Doric, or raised by the heavenward aspiration of the Gothic temple; soothed by the mild repose of Palladio, and enlivened by the playful fancy of Scamozzi; sobered by the severe purity of the Greeks, and relaxed by the picturesque riot of Vanbrugh; attracted by the inviting urbanity of the Vicentine villa, and repelled by the gloomy frown of the Florentine castle. Among the pieces of true architecture, he shall not need to ask which is the temple, and which the forum. He shall know at a glance the festive theatre, and the stern hall of hood-winked justice, the modest hospital and the patrician palace. He shall not mistake what is public for what is private, nor fail to distinguish which buildings are dedicated

to business, which to pleasure or to repose. All this is expressed by art, not conventionalism, and intelligible to the perfectly artless, as well or better than to him of cultivated taste; and why? Because the cultivation required does not consist in learning but in unlearning the prejudices of a life, -in getting rid of the mass of falsehood imbibed during the years passed in the presence of an indiscriminate mixture and misapplication of every thing that is expressive in architecture, the abuse of employing it all alike for the sake of ornament instead of propriety...In the culture required to feel rightly the effects of this art, there is nothing to be learnt but everything to be unlearnt. The savage and the highly cultivated are alike in this respect; or rather the acme of this cultivation is to approach as near as possible to the feelings of the totally ignorant, of one to whom all architecture is new. ²²

22. *Treatise*, p. 29-30.

The process of cultivation, of transcending the errant masses, is the shedding of the accretions of wasted explanations, of superstitions and sticky stupidity. Garbett subscribes not to the primitivism of Laugier, he specifically rejected the idea of the wooden hut as the paradigm of Greek architecture. Garbett did however subscribe to a source he had in common with Laugier, namely the primitivism of, among others, Rousseau; a form of primitivism which became ubiquitous towards the end of the eighteenth-century. That primitivism envisioned a cultivated savagery, with Diogenes as its hero, representing the summum of conscious thought which desires to revert to a self-conscious savagery. Garbett would have loved to have told the emperor Alexander to remove himself because he and his escort were blocking the recluse's sun. That, allegorically speaking, had been Rousseau's *raison d'être*. The metropolis represented the clothing of an errant mankind, blocking the light, the naked truth if you prefer me

not to mix my metaphors, which the cultivated must re-find. It was a light which the innocent child had not yet lost and the savage by definition could never lose as he was not thought to be conscious of having it in the first place.

This is what distinguished the natural from the acquired. Associations gain in value as their pedigree descends in time. But true associations are the ones justified by Nature as the unchanging source of our symbols. The fact that that process of justification was based on an intricate system of cultural values would have been lost on Garbett.

The syntax of force

Natural association, becomes simply that which is derived directly from a contemporary metaphysics. On that basis Nature afforded Garbett a huge encyclopaedia of complex characters. In Garbett's critical analysis of Alison's theory, these characters could be shown to consist of different combinations of simple elements. For Garbett's architectural purposes, these elements were divided

into two basic classes: those expressing power and those expressing delicacy. When Nature wanted to express power it could do so by making an object angular and hard, giving the object the appearance of solidity. Conversely, when nature wanted to express delicacy it did so by making an object soft and curvaceous. The analogy extended to the biological process of growth: the soft, winding and delicate lines and malleable surfaces of youth inevitably age and are transformed into hard surfaces and angular outlines. Infancy and youth express tenderness, delicacy and playfulness; maturity expresses strength and vigour and old-age complete petrification. Youth determines its own form, old age is battered into shape.

Alison used semantics to illustrate his point further. Power, as the operation of force, is expressed in an object when force is operated on it; when the object is subjected to constraint. Unable to assume a natural form with ease, it is forced into one. Thus the force is operated from

outside. Alison cleverly points out that we use a passive verb to describe its condition: *The oak is gnarled, the body is contorted*. When, on the other hand, we speak of ease and volition in form we use the active verb to describe it i.e. *a flower bends, a vine wreathes itself about the elm, a river winds*.²³

23. *Treatise*, p. 67.