

On Physiognomy (Edited)

Almost all the opinions we have are taken on authority and trust. There is no harm in this; we could not choose worse than by ourselves, in so weak an age. That image of Socrates' discourses, which his friends have transmitted to us, we approve only out of respect for the universal approaval these saying enjoy, not by our own knowledge; they are beyond our experience; if anything of the kind should spring up now, few men would value them.

Socrates makes his soul move a natural and common motion; a peasant said this; a woman said that; he has never anybody in his mouth but carters, joiners, cobblers, and masons; his are inductions and similitudes drawn from the most common and known actions of men; every one understands him. We should never have recognized the nobility and splendor of his admirable conceptions under so mean a form; we, who think all things low and flat, that are not elevated by learned doctrine, and who discern no riches but in pomp and show. This world of ours is only formed for ostentation; men are only puffed up with wind, and are bandied to and fro like tennis-balls. He proposed to himself no vain and idle fancies; his design was to furnish us with precepts and things that more really and fitly serve the use of life; "to keep the mean, to hold our aim in view, and follow nature." (Lucan)

Socrates was also always one and the same, and raised himself, not by starts but by will, to the highest pitch of vigor; or, to say better, mounted not at all, but rather brought down, reduced and subjected all asperities and difficulties to his original and natural condition; for, Socrates ever creeps upon the ground, and with a gentle and ordinary pace, treats of the most useful matters, and bears himself, both at his death and in the rudest difficulties that could present themselves, in the ordinary way of human life.

It has turned out well, that the man most worthy to be known and to be presented to the world for example, should be he of whom we have the most certain knowledge; he has been prided in by the most clear-sighted men that ever were; the testimonies we have of him are admirable both in fidelity and fullness. It is a great thing that he was able so to order the pure imaginations of a child, that, without altering or wresting them, he thereby produced the most beautiful effects of our soul: he presents it neither elevated nor rich; he only represents it sound, but assuredly with a brisk and full health. By these common and natural springs, by these ordinary and popular fancies, without being moved or put out, he set up not only the most regular, but the most high and vigorous beliefs, actions, and manners that ever were.

It is Socrates who brought again from heaven human wisdom, to restore her to man, with whom her most just and greatest business lies. See him plead before his judges; observe by what reasons he rouses his courage to the hazards of war; with what arguments he fortifies his patience against slander, tyranny, death, and the perverseness of his wife; you will find nothing in all this borrowed from arts and sciences: the simplest may there discover their own means and strength; it is not possible more to retire or to creep more low. He has done human nature a great kindness, in showing it how much it can do of itself. We are all of us richer than we think we are; but we are taught to borrow and to beg, and brought up more to make use of what is another's than of our own. Man can in nothing fix himself to his actual necessity: of pleasure, wealth, and power, he grasps at more than he can hold; his greediness is incapable of moderation. And I find that in

curiosity of knowing he is the same; he cuts himself out more work than he can do, and more than he needs to do: extending the utility of knowledge, to the full of its matter: "in learning, as in other things, we suffer from intemperance." (Seneca)

We have no want of good masters, interpreters of natural simplicity. Socrates shall be one. "The failing of one life is the passage to a thousand other lives." Nature has imprinted in beasts the care of themselves and of their conservation; they proceed so far as to be timorous of being worse, of hitting or hurting themselves, of our haltering and beating them, accidents subject to their sense and experience; but that we should kill them, they cannot fear, nor have they the faculty to imagine and conclude such a thing as death; it is said, indeed, that we see them not only cheerfully undergo it, horses for the most part neighing and swans singing when they die, but, moreover, seek it at need, of which elephants have given many examples. But besides, is not the way of arguing which Socrates here makes use of, equally admirable both in simplicity and vehemence?

Truly, it is much more easy to speak like Aristotle, and to live like Caesar, than to speak and live as Socrates did; there lies the extreme degree of perfection and difficulty; art cannot reach it. Now, our faculties are not so trained up: we do not try, we do not know them; we invest ourselves with those of others, and let our own lie idle; as some one may say of me, that I have here only made a bouquet of picked flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the thread that ties them.

But Socrates was a perfect exemplar in all great qualities, and I am vexed that he had so deformed a face and body as is said, and so unsuitable to the beauty of his soul, himself being so amorous and such an admirer of beauty: Nature did him wrong.

But there is nothing more probable than the conformity and relation of the body to the soul: "It matters a great deal in what sort of body the soul is lodged; for there are many things about the body that sharpen the mind, many that blunt it." (Cicero) This man is speaking of an unnatural ugliness and deformity of limbs; but we call ugliness also an unseemliness at first sight, which is principally lodged in the face, and disgusts us on very slight grounds, by the complexion, a spot, a rugged countenance, for some reasons often wholly inexplicable, in members nevertheless of good symmetry and perfect.

Superficial ugliness, which nevertheless is always the most imperious, is of least prejudice to the state of the mind, and of little certainty in the opinion of men. The other, which by a more proper name, is called deformity, more substantial, strikes deeper in. Not every shoe of smooth shining leather, but every shoe well made, shows the shape of the foot within.

As Socrates said of his, it betrayed equal ugliness in his soul, had he not corrected it by education; but in saying so, I believe he did but scoff, as his custom was; never so excellent a soul made itself. I cannot often enough repeat how great an esteem I have for beauty, that potent and advantageous quality; he called it "a short tyranny," and Plato, "the privilege of nature." We have nothing that excels it in reputation; it has the first place in the commerce of men; it presents itself in the front; seduces and prepossesses our judgments with great authority and wonderful impression. Phryne had lost her cause in the hands of an excellent advocate, if, opening her robe, she had not corrupted her judges by the luster of her beauty. And I find that Cyrus, Alexander, and Caesar, the three masters of the world, never neglected beauty in their greatest affairs. The same word in Greek signifies both fair and good; and the Holy Word often says good, when it means fair; I should willingly maintain the priority in good things, according to the song that Plato calls an idle thing, taken out of some ancient poet; "health, beauty, riches."

Aristotle says that the right of command appertains to the beautiful; and that, when there is a person whose beauty comes near the images of the gods, veneration is equally due to him. To him who asked why people oftener and longer frequent the company of handsome persons: "That question," said he, "is only to be asked by the blind." Most of the philosophers, and the greatest, paid for their schooling, and acquired wisdom by the favor and mediation of their beauty.

Not only in the men that serve me, but also in the beasts, I consider it within two fingers' breadth of goodness. And yet I fancy that those features and molds of face, and those lineaments, by which men guess at our internal complexions and our fortunes to come, is a thing that does not very directly and simply lie under the chapter of beauty and deformity, no more than every good odor and serenity of air promises health, nor all fog and stink, infection in a time of pestilence. Such as accuse ladies of contradicting their beauty by their manners, do not always hit right; for, in a face which is none of the best, there may dwell some air of probity and trust; as on the contrary I have read, between two beautiful eyes, menaces of a dangerous and malignant nature.

A person's look is but a feeble warranty; and yet it is something considerable too; and if I had to lash them, I would most severely scourge the wicked ones who belie and betray the promises that nature has planted in their foreheads; I should with greater severity punish malice under a mild and gentle face.

There are beauties which are not only haughty, but sour, and others that are not only gentle but more than that, insipid; to prognosticate from them future events, is a matter that I shall leave undecided. I have, as I have said elsewhere, as to my own concern, simply and implicitly embraced this ancient rule, "That we cannot fail in following Nature," and that the sovereign precept is to "conform ourselves to her."

I have not, as Socrates did, corrected my natural composition by the force of reason, and have not in the least disturbed my inclination by art; I have let myself go as I came; I contend not; my two principal parts live, of their own accord, in peace and good intelligence, but my nurse's milk, thank God, was tolerably wholesome and good. That reason which straightens Socrates from his vicious bend, renders him obedient to the gods and men of authority in his city; courageous in death, not because his soul is immortal, but because he is so wonderfully mortal.