

**ON THE LIMITS OF
DESCRIPTIVE
WRITING APROPOS OF
LESSING'S LAOCOON**

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On the Limits of Descriptive Writing Apropos of Lessing's Laocoon by Frank Egbert Bryant

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FRANK EGBERT BRYANT

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO RHETORICAL THEORY

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Compliments of
Mr. Frank E. Bryant.
Cambridge, Mass.

VI

On the Limits of Descriptive Writing
Apropos of Lessing's Laocoon

BY

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PREFACE

Many of the objections that this monograph urges against the theories of the *Laocoon* first occurred to me in the spring of 1901 while I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan. It was not until the next year, however, while a fellow in English at Yale, that the ideas were put into written form. They were at that time embodied in a paper read before the Yale English Club. Since then I have given considerable attention to the subject, have enlarged the scope of the inquiry, and have collected much new material.

In spite of my apparently hostile attitude to the *Laocoon* in the beginning of the paper, the ultimate purpose of my work has been much the same as Lessing's. It is an attempt to get past the mere externals of criticism to the fundamental principle, and by means of this principle to discover the aesthetic and linguistic limitations of descriptive literature. In carrying out this programme I hope that everywhere I have used scientific caution. Though some of the theories advanced are new, I have tried to base them on adequate psychological foundations. If I have made mistakes I shall be glad to rectify them.

I take pleasure in thanking all who have assisted me in preparing this monograph. My greatest obligation is to Professor Scott, who not only first interested me in the study of rhetorical problems, but who has ever since kept alive this interest with frequent encouragement, and who now, in editing this work, has done me the great service of pruning it of much extraneous material. I also wish to thank Professors Pillsbury, Rebec, and Hempl of the University of Michigan, Professor Cook of Yale, and the members of the English department in the University of Kansas.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

F. E. B.

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LESSING'S LAOCOON

Bosanquet, in his *History of Aesthetic*, has pointed out a very curious and surprising fact with reference to the occasion that brought forth Lessing's *Laocoon*. He says:

"The occasion of the *Laocoon* was such as to show with a force amounting to irony, the superior importance of ideas as compared with particular facts. Winckelmann had said, in his treatise *On the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture*, that the expression in Greek statues always revealed a great and composed soul, and that this was illustrated by the famous *Laocoon* group, in which *Laocoon's* features expressed no such extremity of suffering as would be realistically in accordance with the situation, and more particularly, did not indicate him to be crying out, as *Virgil* describes him. Lessing, aroused, as he admits, by the implied censure on *Virgil*, maintains that the absence of agonized expression in *Laocoon's* features, and of all sign of outcry—which he completely accepts as a fact—is to be accounted for not by the demands of Greek character, but by the laws of Greek sculpture; in other words, that portrayal of extreme suffering and its expression, legitimate in poetry, was prohibited by the law and aim of beauty, which he alleged to be supreme in formative art.

"Now the tendency of skilled criticism ever since Lessing's day has been to deny the alleged fact that *Laocoon* is represented in the marble group as silent or nearly so, and with an expression far removed from that of extreme bodily suffering. The truth appears to be that the group is a work of the Rhodian school, which retained little of the great Greek style, and was chiefly distinguished by technical skill and forcible presentation of ideas. The expression of pain is violent, and the abstinence from crying out is exceedingly doubtful. It is remarkable that the observation with reference to which such influential theories were propounded, should be of questionable accuracy."

This is indeed remarkable, but these later opinions concerning the *Laocoon* group do not at all affect the validity of Lessing's theory as a theory of perfect art. For, according to Bosanquet, not only is it held that the priest, *Laocoon*, utters cries, but it is also held that this group belongs to an inferior period of sculpture; the one conclusion, therefore, neutralizes the other, and perhaps the only effect of the investigations is to throw the *Laocoon* group out of the discussion. Lessing's theory may still be correct, though this group can no longer be used as an illustration of it.

But the point just made by Bosanquet is not the only surprising thing that has been noticed about the *Laocoon*. The book has two titles: *Laocoon; oder, Ueber die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie.*¹ The first of these titles would lead us to expect a work on sculpture, while the second one tells us that it is to deal with painting and poetry. That is, these

¹ B. Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*, pp. 221-2.

² *Laocoon; or, Concerning the Limits of Painting and Poetry.*

titles betray an inconsistency,—and one that is also to be found within the pages of the book.¹ It is due to the fact that Lessing has not distinguished between the different formative arts. To him, apparently, the same laws apply to painting that apply to sculpture. He has thus made the same mistake in his treatment of the formative arts that he criticises other persons for making in their treatment of the limits of painting and poetry. This being true, the very argument that he develops regarding this latter subject may be turned back against himself to discredit what he says concerning the formative arts. But this second discrepancy is again one upon which it is unnecessary to dwell. It is admitted that some of the things that Lessing said about formative art are not true. His defenders tell us that "art" after all was not his forte. It is to the science of literary criticism that the *Laocoon* makes its most brilliant contribution.

We may therefore narrow our inquiry to the single question: What is the value of Lessing's contribution to the theory of literary art? or more specifically, How far was he right in his delimitation of descriptive literature? Let us first take a rapid survey of his argument.

We have already learned, in the passage from Bosanquet, what occasioned the *Laocoon*. It was the fact that Winckelmann had tried to prescribe the same laws for the poet that he had given to the sculptor. Lessing saw very clearly that this would not do. The priest made no outcry not because of the demands of Greek character but because of the laws of Greek sculpture. Lessing pointed out more than one example in which Greek poets had made their heroes cry out and show other evidences of violent pain or grief. He showed that "art" has certain limitations; for instance, since in any one representation it can present its object from but one point of view, the object can be shown in but a single stage of development, and this stage remains before us as long as we view the representation. It was such limitations as these that probably influenced the artist in his treatment of the *Laocoon* group. Scarcely any of these limitations, however, could influence the work of the poet. Poetry does not appeal to the eye alone. Furthermore, nothing obliges the poet to concentrate his picture into a single moment. He can take up every action, if he will, from its origin, and carry it through all possible changes to its issue. This suggested that the difference in the treatment of the *Laocoon* story by the poet and by the sculptor should be explained as arising out of a difference in the media through which the representation is effected. But it will not be necessary for us to follow Lessing's argument throughout all the turns of its sinuous course. Suffice it to say that after much apparent wandering he is finally able to gather up all the threads of his exposition into the famous group of arguments on the limits of painting and poetry. The important part that they play in this study, as well as their own interest, justifies me in quoting them almost in full.

Lessing says:

¹ *Laocoon*, XVI, Translation by Ellen Frothingham, Boston: 1887.

"I will try to prove my conclusions by starting from first principles.

"I argue thus. If it be true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry,—the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time,—and if signs must unquestionably stand in convenient relation with the thing signified, then signs arranged side by side can represent only objects existing side by side, or whose parts so exist, while consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other, in time.

"Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist, are called bodies. Consequently bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting.

"Objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other in time, are actions. Consequently actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry.

"All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present, action. Consequently painting can imitate actions also, but only as they are suggested through forms.

"Actions, on the other hand, cannot exist independently, but must always be joined to certain agents. In so far as those agents are bodies or are regarded as such, poetry describes also bodies, but only indirectly through actions.

"Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.

"Poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action.

"Hence the rule for the employment of a single descriptive epithet, and the cause of the rare occurrence of descriptions of physical objects.

"I should place less confidence in this dry chain of conclusions, did I not find them fully confirmed by Homer, or, rather, had they not been first suggested to me by Homer's method. These principles alone furnish a key to the noble style of the Greek, and enable us to pass just judgment on the opposite method of many modern poets who insist upon emulating the artist in a point where they must of necessity remain inferior to him.

"I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions, and generally with a single touch. If Homer, for instance, wants us to see the chariot of Juno, Hebe must put it together piece by piece before our eyes. When Homer wishes to tell us how Agamemnon was dressed, he makes the king put on every article of raiment in our presence: the soft tunic, the great mantle, the beautiful sandals, and the sword. When he is thus fully equipped he grasps his sceptre. We see the clothes while the poet is describing the act of dressing. An inferior writer would have described the clothes down to the minutest fringe, and of the action we should have seen nothing."

When Homer describes the sceptre, instead of presenting us with a copy of it, he gives a history. "And so at last," says Lessing, "I know this sceptre better than if a painter should put it before my eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into my hands." If it is Homer's sole object to give

us a picture, he will yet break this up into a sort of history in order that the coexistent parts may follow each other in the time order.

"But," continues Lessing, "it may be urged, the signs employed in poetry not only follow each other, but are also arbitrary; and, as arbitrary signs, they are certainly capable of expressing things as they exist in space,"—witness Homer's description of the shield of Achilles. Lessing says that he will proceed to answer this double objection—double, because a just conclusion must hold, though unsupported by examples, and on the other hand the example of Homer has great weight with him, even when he is unable to justify it by rules. At this point we might expect him to meet the first of the objections by denying that the signs of language are arbitrary. This plain and simple solution of the difficulty does not, however, occur to him. Accepting as a fact the alleged arbitrariness of language, he tries to escape the dilemma by affirming that while it is true that this property of language does help the prose-writer to make objects plain and intelligible, it does not enable the poet to paint, a thing that the poet must always aim to do. Then he asks the question, "How do we obtain a clear idea of a thing in space?"

He answers, "First we observe its separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole. Our senses perform these various operations with such amazing rapidity as to make them seem but one. This rapidity is absolutely essential to our obtaining an idea of the whole, which is nothing more than the result of the conception of the parts and of their connection with each other. Suppose now that the poet should lead us in proper order from one part of the object to the other; suppose he should succeed in making the connection of these parts perfectly clear to us; how much time will he have consumed?"

"The details, which the eye takes in at a glance, he enumerates slowly one by one, and it often happens that, by the time he has brought us to the last, we have forgotten the first. Yet from these details we are to form a picture. When we look at an object the various parts are always present to the eye. It can run over them again and again. The ear, however, loses the details it has heard, unless memory retain them. And if they be so retained, what pains and effort it costs to recall their impressions in the proper order and with even the moderate degree of rapidity necessary to the obtaining of a tolerable idea of the whole." Lessing then quotes two stanzas from Von Haller's *Alps* to illustrate the point that he has just been making.

We may neglect for our purpose that which follows in the next few pages of his book but in his statements with reference to the shield of Achilles we take up again the main thread of the argument. He begins thus:

"But I am lingering over trifles and seem to have forgotten the shield of Achilles, that famous picture, which more than all else, caused Homer to be regarded among

* *Laocoon*, XVII.

† *Laocoon*, XVIII.