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ON THE BOUNDARIES OF POETRY  
AND PAINTING**

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**EDWARD L. WALTER**

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**Philosophical Papers**

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SECOND SERIES, No. 3.

Lessing on the Boundaries of Poetry and Painting.

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## ON SOME POINTS IN LESSING'S LAOCOON.

BY PROFESSOR E. L. WALTER.

It would be possible, in talking of the Laocoon, to touch on almost every phase of criticism, both in literature and art, without wandering from the subject, so discursive is Lessing, so multifarious are the subjects of his thought, so suggestive is everything he says. In fact, aside from the interest and importance of his subject matter, this suggestiveness and discursiveness are Lessing's principal charms. We seem to see a powerful mind at work; and it is always one of the most instructive as well as one of the most attractive of experiences, to see how such a mind arrives at its conclusions, especially when, as is the case here, all is clothed in a literary style of supreme charm. I shall discuss only that which is the chief subject of the Laocoon, indicated by the sub-title, "On the limits of poetry and painting," and shall deal only with one part of the argument even on this subject.

It should be said at the outset that the Laocoon is only a fragment, like most of Lessing's work; in this he resembled him whom we must regard upon the whole as the greatest of his French contemporaries, Diderot, for whom Lessing entertained a hearty admiration and esteem. There is no doubt that if he had published a second part, he would have modified some of his statements, and that some of the best-founded objections to his theories would

have been treated acutely and candidly, as he treated all dissidents from his views who were not moved by mere ignorance or malice. Herder and Moses Mendelssohn were not men like Pastor Goeze, to be treated with that savage scorn which immortalized its object. The notes he left for the continuation of his Laocoon show clearly enough what every student was quite ready to believe, that he would have met every fair objection in the same spirit which prompted it.

The argument of the Laocoon, stripped of its illustrations and digressions, can be stated briefly. It is in two parts, the argument from the study of the master-pieces in poetry and painting, and the argument from abstract principles, the argument *a priori*, with part of the second of which only I shall deal.

He finds that the test of good poetry set up by some critics, i. e., whether it can be transferred to canvass, fails singularly when applied. Some of the most admirable poetry in the world lends itself very sparingly to illustration by the painter, and some of the most beautiful pictures in the world are of scenes which are left untouched by the very poet who, if this principle were true, would naturally describe them at length. Furthermore, when poets have tried apparently to paint so that painters can follow them, they have failed in giving even remotely such an idea of what they try to paint, as would be given by a single glance at the treatment of the same subject by a painter or sculptor; on the other hand, a painter who should try to put on canvass what a poet has successfully painted, would fail as miserably. Again, we do not like to see a painting of an ugly person or even of a beautiful person whose beauty has been defaced by a disfiguring emotion, while in poetry the violent emotions which disfigure have

inspired many most admirable and effective passages, and even plain persons may become objects of most passionate admiration. Whence comes all this? Evidently from the difference in the aim of painting and poetry, and this depends upon the means at command of either art. Painting deals with stationary imitation, poetry with progressive imitation. Accept this and all is explained.

But he reaches the same result when he tries to deduce his conclusions without regard to masterpieces in the arts. There must indisputably be a suitable relation between the signs used in the arts and the things signified. Now painting uses figures and colors in space, poetry articulate sounds in time; hence signs which are coexistent in space, like colors and figures, can properly express only things which coexist in space, and signs which follow each other in time, like articulate tones, can properly express only things which follow each other in time. Painting, therefore, can represent only bodies, actions only as these bodies exist in time, and may change in appearance every moment of their existence; poetry, therefore, can represent only actions, bodies only as these actions are connected with certain bodies which exist in space. He says that this dry chain of reasoning (I have abbreviated it considerably) would not be so convincing to him, if he did not find it confirmed by the practice of Homer, or rather if it had not been the practice of Homer which suggested it.

Of course no mere outline, such as I have given, can do justice to the argument, but what is lacking is rather the felicity, the precision and the force of expression, than the substance of the argument itself; it is rather the wide range of illustration, the acute discussion of subsidiary questions which have only an indirect bearing upon the general question, the total impression of vigor and in-



sight which force themselves upon the attention of every reader and suggest perhaps a more binding power in the argument than a close analysis shows. There has been no lack of close analysis of the Laocoon nor of far-reaching objections. Every position which Lessing has taken in it has been denied by all sorts and conditions of men, his judgment on isolated questions, as well as the general principles he seeks to establish. Art, archæology, literary criticism, textual criticism, the principles of interpretation, authority, philosophy, ingenuity and stupidity, malice and prejudice, have all in turn been directed against him, by men who differ as widely in temper and sense as Herder and Herr Klotz, in intellectual attitude as Moses Mendelssohn and Vischer.

It cannot be denied that much has been pointed out which is actually wrong in fact, much which is faulty in argument or defective in statement, much that is doubtful in judgment, but the main position which he sought to establish has, in my opinion, only been strengthened by the subsequent discussion, the position, namely, that the proper province of poetry is the description of actions, of painting and sculpture the representation of bodies; that poets should describe only sparingly and in connection with actions, that painters should paint actions only so far as bodies can indicate them.

The errors of fact pointed out in Lessing's essay are almost exclusively due to defective information, for which he can not be blamed. This is especially true in archæology, where errors of fact are most abundant; in nearly every case, his statements were either true in his day, having been proved false only by subsequent discoveries, or he had never had access to original sources of information, in which case he is certainly excusable. Not

an error of fact of any importance has, I think, been pointed out in the whole essay where a similar excuse cannot be offered.

As to the other kinds of errors, those which critics have imagined they have found are partly matters in which there may fairly be a difference of opinion, and the rest can be attributed to a fact that should never be forgotten in any criticism of the *Laocoon*, viz.: that Lessing was the first to set himself deliberately to consider the question here discussed. Now it would be indeed strange if in the first discussion of so complicated a question, into the solution of which must of necessity enter so largely individual impressions, which depends so largely upon the comparison of so many isolated and widely separated facts,—it would be indeed strange if no weakness were found. For Lessing had no predecessor in this discussion; the most careful research has been able to find nothing of any importance bearing on the subject directly except a few paragraphs or sections in books on allied subjects. It is possible, of course, that the main position taken in the *Laocoon* was suggested by one of these isolated utterances, but besides the impossibility of proving any such thing, it would scarcely impair the originality of the essay, even if proved, for in any case all the developments are Lessing's own.

In discussing before a philosophical society questions of high criticism, I have, I trust, a becoming sense of modesty. I have no consistent and far-reaching theory of æsthetics to depend on, but shall be guided chiefly by a quality which is rather hard to define accurately, which, I believe, has never done anything of great consequence in philosophy, but which, I venture to think, has not infrequently come to right results by wrong methods, not only

in everyday matters, but also in in the more delicate and difficult matters of speculation. This quality, which every one assumes himself to have, is common sense, reinforced in this case by opinions which are pretty firmly held, even if feebly supported by reason. Moreover, most of what I shall say will not call for the exercise of much beyond the power of understanding and reporting what others say; I lay claim to nothing but a fairly good acquaintance with some of the more important discussions on the subject which have appeared since 1766, the date of the first publication of the *LAOCOON*.

It is fortunately not necessary for me to define what is meant by poetry. It is sufficient to point out the greater elasticity of the term in ordinary use, as contrasted with painting and sculpture on one hand and prose on the other. A miserable daub in a country inn is a painting as well as a portrait by Titian or Velasquez; that amazing statue in Washington in which the horse forever stands on one hind leg, is as much a statue as the immortal Venus of Milo or the glorious Dionysus of Praxiteles. So also very few of us would be surprised as was Molière's M. Jourdain, at learning that we had been talking prose all our lives; what we say is as certainly prose as the splendid periods of Burke or the heavily-weighted phrases of Carlyle. But the term poetry is elastic enough to allow some cultivated persons to speak of the poetry of Martin Farquhar Tupper, at which other cultivated persons laugh scornfully; or a very different case from this—a large, intelligent, cultivated and not illiberal body of persons assert that Walt Whitman's poetry is not poetry at all, but consists mainly of what he himself calls *barbaric yelps*, while another body of readers, smaller to be sure, but whose intelligence is just as penetrating, whose culture is just as broad, pronounce these