

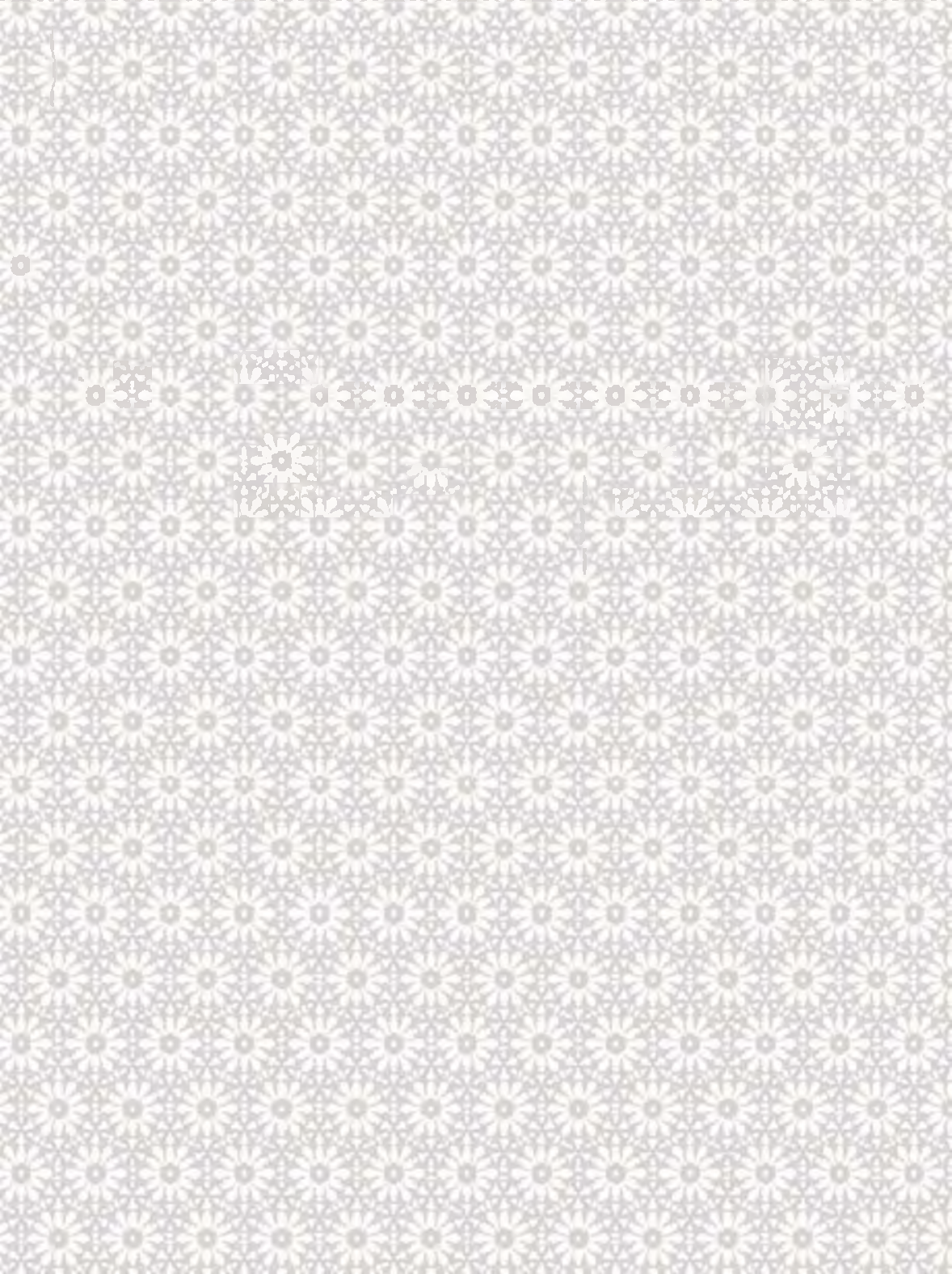
Caricature, The Fantastic, The Grotesque

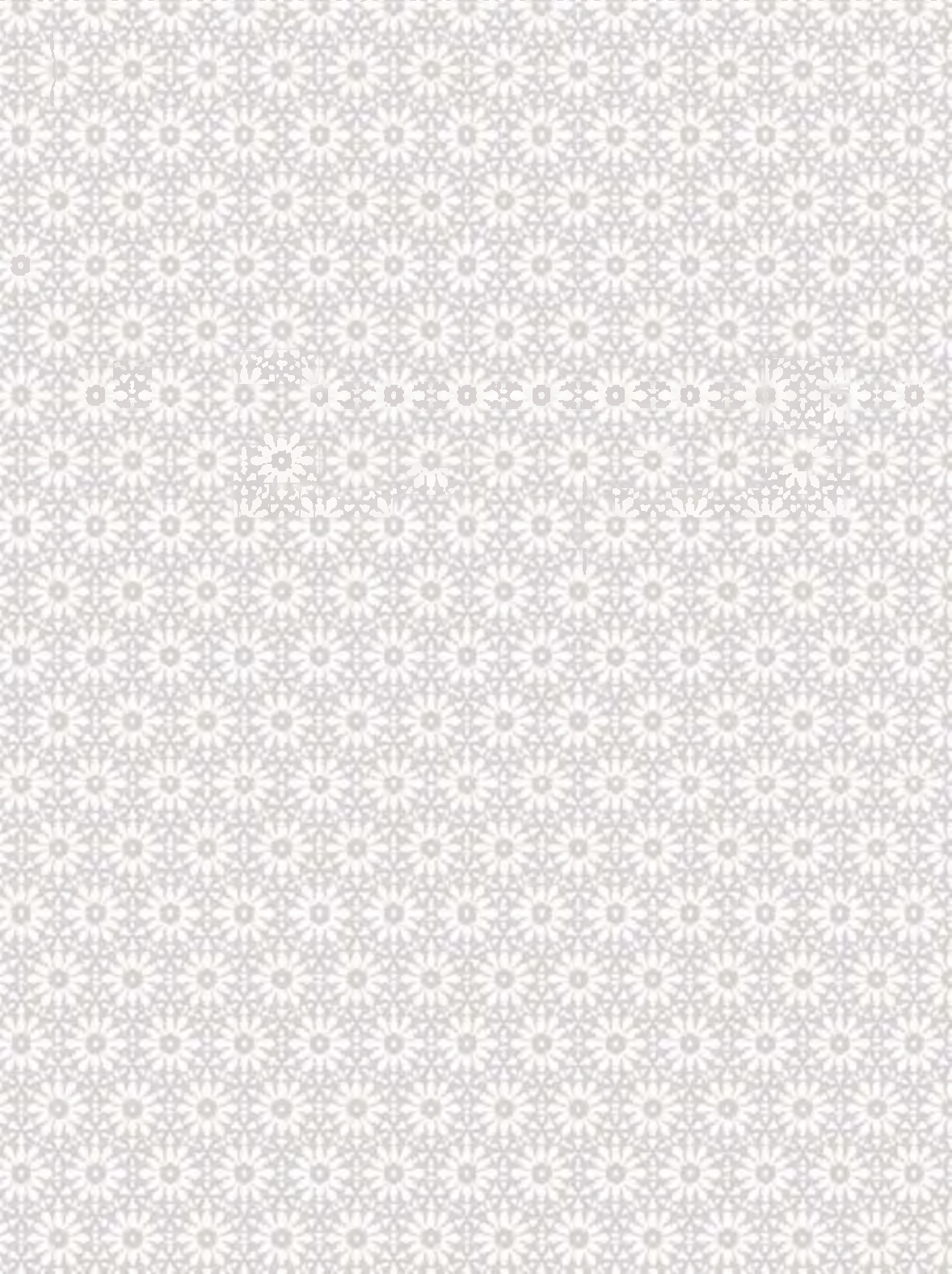
John Addington Symonds

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John Addington Symonds

**CARICATURE, THE FANTASTIC,
THE GROTESQUE**



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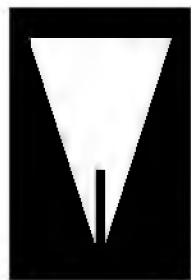
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CARICATURE, THE FANTASTIC, THE GROTESQUE

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ESSAYS

SPECULATIVE AND SUGGESTIVE

BY

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

εἰρητικὸν εἶναι φασὶ τὴν ἐρημίαν.

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CARICATURE, THE FANTASTIC, THE GROTESQUE

I

CARICATURE is a distinct species of characterisation, in which the salient features of a person or an object have been emphasised with the view of rendering them ridiculous. The derivation of this word justifies my definition. It comes from the Italian *caricare*, to charge with a burden, or to surcharge. Thus *caricare un ritratto* means to exaggerate what is already prominent in the model, and in this way to produce a likeness which misrepresents the person, while it remains recognisable. Instead of emphasis, simple distortion may be used to secure the effect of caricature. For example, the hints suggested by reflection in a spoon are amplified into an absurd portrait. Some faces and figures lend themselves better to the concave, others to the convex surface of the spoon. Or a fairly accurate image of a man or woman, modelled in gutta-percha, may be pulled about in various directions, with the result of producing a series of burlesque portraits, in which the likeness of the individual is never wholly lost.

The most effective kind of caricature does not proceed by such distortion. It renders its victim ludicrous or vile by exaggerating what is defective, mean, ignoble in his person, indicating at the same time that some corresponding flaws in his spiritual nature are revealed by them. The masterpieces of this art are those in which truth has been accentuated by slight but deft and telling emphasis. Nothing, as Aretino once remarked, is more cruel than malevolent

insistence upon fact. You cannot injure your neighbour better than by telling the truth about him, if the truth is to his discredit. You cannot make him appear ridiculous more crushingly than by calling attention to real faults in his physique.

Those extraordinary caricatures of human faces which *Lionardo da Vinci* delighted to produce, illustrate both methods of emphasis and distortion. But they also exhibit the play of a fantastic imagination. He accentuated the analogies of human with bestial features, or degraded his models to the level of goitred idiots by subtle blurrings and erasures of their nobler traits.

Caricature is not identical with satire. Caricature implies exaggeration of some sort. The bitterest satire hits its mark by no exaggeration, but by indignant and unmerciful exposure of ignobility. Yet caricature has always been used for satirical purposes, with notable effect by *Aristophanes* in his political comedies, with coarse vigour by *Gilray* in lampoons of the last century, with indulgent humour by our contemporary 'Punch.'

The real aim of caricature is to depreciate its object by evoking contempt or stirring laughter, when the imaginative rendering of the person is an unmistakable portrait, but defects are brought into relief which might otherwise have escaped notice. Instead therefore of being realistic, this branch of art must be reckoned as essentially idealistic. In so far as a caricature is powerfully conceived, it calls into play fine, though never the noblest, never the most amiable, qualities of interpretation.

II

The fantastic need have no element of caricature. It invariably implies a certain exaggeration or distortion of nature; but it lacks that deliberate intention to disparage which lies at the root of caricature. What we call fantastic in art results from an exercise of the capricious fancy, playing with things which it combines into arbitrary non-existent forms. These may be merely graceful, as is the case with

arabesques devised by old Italian painters—frescoed patterns upon walls and ceilings, in which tendrils of the vine, acanthus foliage, parts of beasts and men and birds and fabulous creatures are brought into quasi-organic fusion with candelabra, goblets, lyres, and other familiar objects of utility.

In its higher manifestations fantastic art creates beautiful or terrific forms in correspondence with some vision of the excited imagination. The sphinx and the dragon, the world-snake of Scandinavian mythology, Shakespeare's Ariel, Dante's Lucifer, are fantastic in this higher sense. In them real conditions of man's subjective being have taken sensuous shape at the bidding of creative genius. The artist, while giving birth to such fantastic creatures of imagination, resembles a deeply-stirred and dreaming man, whose brain projects impossible shapes to symbolise the perturbations of his spirit. Myth and allegory, the metamorphosis of mortals into plants, fairies, satyrs, nymphs, and tutelary deities of sea or forest, are examples of the fantastic in this sphere of highest poetry.

According to the view which I have just expressed, fantastic art has to be considered as the least realistic of all artistic species; it is that in which the human mind shows its ideality, its subjective freedom, its independence of fact and external nature, most completely. Here a man's studies of reality outside him, acute and penetrating as these may be, become subservient to the presentation of thoughts and emotions which have no validity except for his internal consciousness.

He will watch from dawn till gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be,
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality.

When well constructed, powerfully conceived, vigorously projected, with sufficiency of verisimilitude to give them

rank among extraordinary phenomena, and with sufficient correspondence to the natural moods of human thought, these phantasies and their appropriate shapes acquire a reality of their own, and impose upon the credulity of mankind. They are felt to be actual through the force with which their makers felt them, and through their adaptation to the fancies of imaginative minds in general. Thus the chimæra of Hellenic sculpture, the horned and hooped devil of mediæval painting, Shakespeare's Caliban, Milton's Death, Goethe's Mephistopheles, can all be claimed as products of fantastic art. Yet these figments are hardly less real for our consciousness than the Farnese bull, Lancelot, Landseer's stags, Hamlet, Dr. Brown's Rab, Adam Bede, and other products of imaginative art which are modelled from familiar objects. In this way fantastic art strikingly brings home to us the truth of what Tasso once said: *Non è creatore se non Iddio ed il poeta* (God and the poet are the only creators). It does this because it proves that the recombining power of the imagination, as in dreams, so also in poetry and plastic art, is able to construct unrealities which possess even more than the spiritual influence and all but the validity of fact for human minds.

III

The grotesque is a branch of the fantastic. Its specific difference lies in the fact that an element of caricature, whether deliberately intended or imported by the craftsman's spontaneity of humour, forms an ingredient in the thing produced. Certain races and certain epochs display a predilection for the grotesque, which is conspicuously absent in others. Hellenic art, I think, was never intentionally grotesque, except on rare occasions in the comedy of Aristophanes. What resembles grotesqueness in the archaic stages of Greek sculpture—in the bas-reliefs from Selinus, for example—must be ascribed to *naïveté* and lack of technical skill. On the contrary, Lombard sculpture, as we study this on the façades of North Italian churches, and mediæval Teutonic art in general, as we study this upon the pages of illustrated

manuscripts, in the choir-stalls of our cathedrals, or in the carven ornaments of their exteriors, rarely fails to introduce some grotesque element. The free play of the Northern fancy ran over easily into distortion, degradation of form, burlesque. Scandinavian poetry of the best period exhibits striking specimens of Aristophanic satire, in which the gods are mercilessly dealt with. Grotesqueness may be traced in all the fantastic beings of Celtic and Germanic folk-lore—in gnomes inhabiting the mountains, in kelpies of the streams and mermaids of the ocean, in Puck and Robin Goodfellow, in fairies of heath and woodland, in the princesses of Border ballad-literature fated by magic spells to dree their doom as loathly dragons.

Of such grotesqueness I doubt whether we can discern a trace in classical mythology and art. Ugly stories about Zeus and Cronos, quaint stories about the metamorphoses of Proteus, and the Phorceydes with their one eye, are not grotesque. They lack the touch of caricature, always a conscious or semi-conscious element, which is needful to create the species.

This element is absent in the voluminous literature of the Arabs, as that is known to us through the 'Arabian Nights.' Princesses transformed into parrots, djinns with swarthy faces doting on fair damsels, water-carriers converted by some spell into caliphs, ghouls, animals that talk, immense birds brooding over treasures in the wilderness, are not grotesque. They lack the touch of conscious caricature added to free fancy which differentiates the species.

Both caricature and the fantastic played an important part in Southern and Eastern literature, but they did not come into the peculiar connection which is necessary to grotesqueness. The fantastic made itself moderately felt in Hellas, and assumed gigantic proportions in Islam. The Asiatic and Greek minds, however, lacked a quality which was demanded in order to elicit grotesqueness from phantasy. That quality the Teutonic section of the Aryan family possessed in abundance; it was all-pervasive in the products of their genius. We may define it broadly as humour. I do not deny humour to the

Greeks and Orientals; but I contend that Teutons have the merit of applying humour to caricature and the fantastic, so as to educe from both in combination what we call grotesqueness.

For obvious reasons I must omit all mention of what strikes us as grotesque in the art-work of races with whom we are imperfectly in sympathy. Hindoo idols, Chinese and Japanese bronzes, Aztec bas-reliefs, and such things, seem to us grotesque. But it is almost impossible to decide how far this apparent grotesqueness is due to inadequate comprehension on our part, or to religious symbolism. We cannot eliminate the element of genuine intentional grotesqueness which things so far remote from us contain.

IV

Closely allied to caricature and the grotesque we find obscenity. This indeed has generally entered into both. The reason is not far to seek. Nothing exposes human beings to more contemptuous derision than the accentuation in their persons of that which self-respect induces them to hide. Indecency is therefore a powerful resource for satirical caricaturists. Nothing, again, in the horse-play of the fancy comes readier to hand than the burlesque exhibition of things usually concealed. It appeals to the gross natural man, upon whose sense of humour the creator of grotesque imagery wishes to work, and with whom he is in cordial sympathy.

Indecency has always been extruded from the temple of art, and relegated to slums and dubious places in its precincts. Why is this? Perhaps it would suffice to answer that art is a mirror of human life, and that those things which we exclude from social intercourse are consequently excluded from the æsthetic domain. This is an adequate account of the matter. But something will be gained for the understanding of art in general if we examine the problem with more attention.

Shelley lays it down as an axiom that all obscenity implies a crime against the spiritual nature of man. This dictum takes for granted an advanced state of society, when merely

sensual functions have come to be regarded with sensitive modesty. In other words, it defines the essence of obscenity to be some cynical or voluptuous isolation of what is animal in man, for special contemplation by the mind. Savages recognise nothing indecent in things which we consider highly improper. Our ancestors spoke without a blush about matters which could not now be mentioned before a polite company. This is because savages and people of the Elizabethan age were naïve, where we have become self-conscious. Thus Shelley's *crimen læsæ majestatis* varies with the age and the conditions of civility in which men live. Much that is treasonable here and now against the spiritual nature of humanity was unassailable two hundred years ago, and is still respectable in the tropics. The point at issue is to decide what constitutes a violation of local and temporal decorum in this respect. Such violation is obscenity; and the conditions vary almost imperceptibly with the growth of society, but always in favour of decorum.

There are many things allowable, nay laudable, in act, which it is unpermissible to represent in figurative art or to dwell upon in poetry. Yet these things imply nothing ugly. On the contrary, they are compatible with the highest degree of natural beauty. Even Aretino's famous postures, if painted with the passion of Giorgione, could not be pronounced unbeautiful. Such motives abound in juxtapositions of forms and in contrasts of physical types, which yield everything the painter most desires for achieving his most ambitious triumphs. The delineation of these things, however, though they are allowable and laudable in act, though they are plastically beautiful, offends our taste and is intolerable. If we ask why this is so, the answer, I think, must be that civilisation only accepts art under the condition of its making for the nobler tendencies of human nature. In truth, I have approached the present topic, in spite of its difficulty, mainly because it confirms the views I hold regarding the dependence of the arts on ethics.

There are acts necessary to the preservation of the species, functions important in the economy of man; but these, by

a tacit consensus of opinion, we refuse to talk about, and these therefore we are unwilling to see reflected in art's spiritual looking-glass. We grudge their being brought into the sphere of intellectual things. We feel that the representation of them, implying as this does the working of the artist's mind and our mind on them, contradicts a self-preservative instinct which has been elaborately cultivated through unnumbered generations for the welfare of the social organism. Such representation brings before the sense in figure what is already powerful enough in fact. It stirs in us what education tends to curb, and exposes what humane culture teaches us to withdraw from observation.

This position admits of somewhat different statement. At a certain point art must make common cause with morality, and the plastically beautiful has to be limited by ethical laws. Man is so complex a being, and in the complex of his nature the morally-trained sensibilities play so prominent a part, that art, which aims at giving only elevated enjoyment, cannot neglect ethics. Without being didactic it must be moralised, because the normal man is moralised. If it repudiates this obligation, it errs against its own ideal of harmony, rhythm, repose, synthetic beauty. It introduces an element which we seek to subordinate in life, and by which we are afraid of being mastered. It ceases to be adequate to humanity in its best moments, and these best moments art has undertaken to present in forms of sensuous but dignified loveliness.

Most people will agree upon this point. There remains, however, considerable difference of opinion as to the boundaries which art dares not overpass—as to what deserves the opprobrious title of indecency in plastic or poetic presentation. Some folk seem inclined to ban the nude without exception, relegating the grandest handiwork of God, the human form divine, to the obscurity of shrouded vestments. Disinclined as I am to adopt this extreme position, I admit that just here the cleanness or uncleanness of the artist's mind, as felt in his touch on doubtful subjects, becomes a matter of ethical importance. All depends on taste, on method of treatment, on the tone communicated, on the mood in which

matters of delicacy have been viewed. Tintoretto elevates our imagination by his pictures of Eve tempting Adam; Michel Angelo restrains and chastens wandering fancy; Raphael removes the same theme beyond the sphere of voluptuous suggestion, while retaining something of its sensuous allurements; Rembrandt produces a cynical satire in the style of Swift's description of Yahoos; Luca Giordano disgusts by coarse and full-blown carnalism.

V

These considerations lead us finally to inquire in what sphere of human sensibility the arts legitimately move.

It is usual to distinguish between æsthetic and non-æsthetic senses—meaning by the former sight and hearing, by the latter touch, taste, smell. In truth, no great art has yet been based upon the three last-mentioned senses, in the same way as painting and sculpture have been based on sight and music upon hearing. This is because the two so-called æsthetic senses are links between what is spiritual in us and external nature; we use them in the finer operations of our intelligence. The three non-æsthetic senses serve utility and natural needs; they have not been brought into that comity where thought and emotion can be sensuously presented to the mind. It is only by the faintest suggestions that a touch, a taste, a smell evokes some spiritual mood. When it does so the effect is indeed striking; we are thrilled in our very entrails and marrow. But these suggestions are, in our present condition, so vague, so elusive, so evanescent, so peculiar to the individual, that no attempt has been made to regard them as a substantial groundwork for the edifice of art.

In man we find an uninterrupted rhythm from the simplest to the most complex states of consciousness, passing from mere sensation up to elaborated thought. No break can be detected in this rhythm, although psychologists are wont to denote its salient moments by distinctive names. They speak of sensation, perception, emotion, will, reason, and so forth, as though these were separate faculties. But the infinite subtlety

of nature eludes such rude attempts at classification. Art finds its proper sphere of operation only in the middle region of the scale. The physical rudiments of consciousness are not æsthetic, because they bring our carnal functions into play, and only indirectly agitate the complex of our nature. The more abstract modes of thought are not æsthetic, because they have renounced the element of corporeity and sense; and art has to fulfil its function through sensuous presentation. Art is therefore obliged to cast roots down into sense, and to flower up into thought, remaining within the province where these extremes of consciousness interpenetrate. This is what Hegel meant when he called beauty *die sinnliche Erscheinung der Idee* (the apparition, to sense and in sense, of the idea)—a definition which, in spite of its metaphysical form, is precisely suited to express the fact.

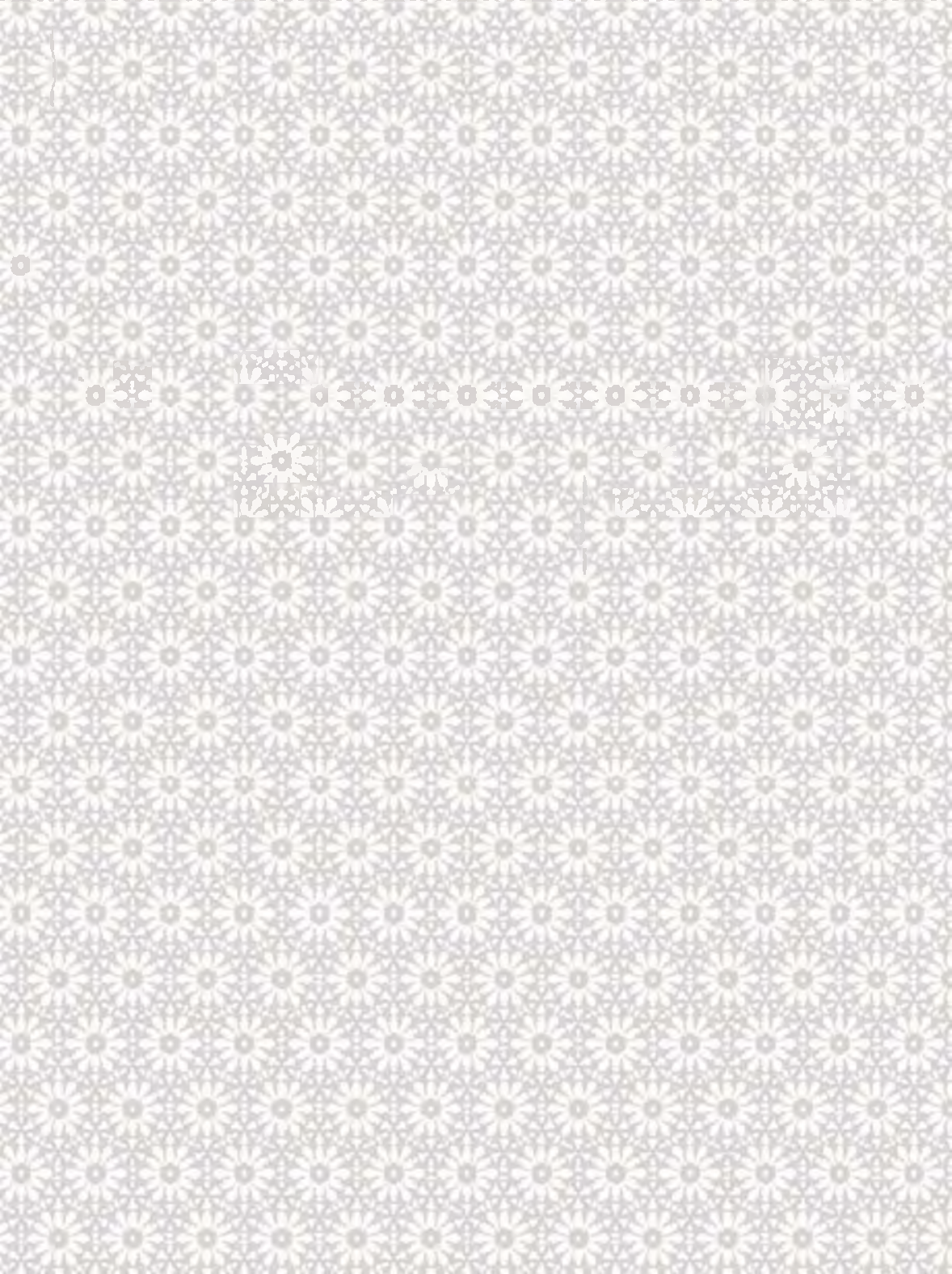
Poetry, if I may apply these conclusions to the most purely intellectual of the arts, makes an appeal to thought, emotion, sense, together, in one blended harmony. If thought predominates too crudely, as in some cantos of Dante's 'Paradiso,' in some books of Lucretius, in many passages of Milton's and of Wordsworth's verse, then the external form of metre and poetic diction does not save the product from being prosaic. On the other hand, if a coarse appeal be made to sense through sound, as in a large portion of Marino's 'Adone,' we are cloyed by sweet vacuity. Or if, as in the case of Baffo's Venetian lyrics, the contents be deliberately prurient, awakening mere animal associations, then no form of sonnet, madrigal, or ode saves this poetry from being prosaic. It meets the same condemnation at the lower end of the scale as we passed on parts of Dante, Lucretius, Milton, Wordsworth at the higher end. Purely intellectual and purely sensual poetry fail alike by contradicting the law of poetry's existence. They are not poetry, but something else.

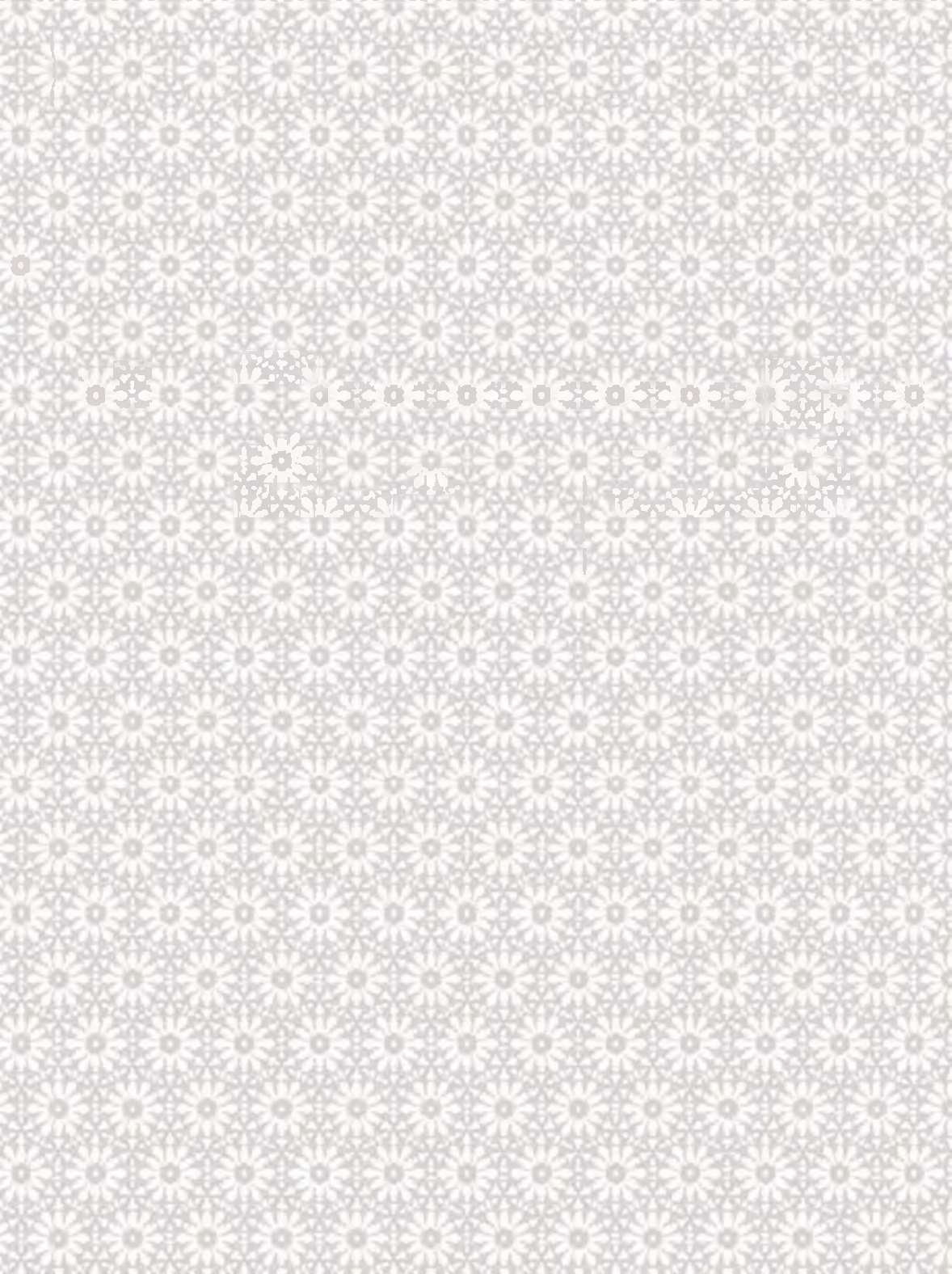
Neither unmixed thought nor unmixed sense is the proper stuff of art. Still we must remember that art, occupying the middle region between these extremes, has to bring the manifold orchestra of consciousness into accord. Nowhere is there an abrupt chasm in man's sentient being. Touch,

taste, smell, sex must be made to vibrate like the dull strings of bass-viols, to thrill like woody tubes of hautboys, to pierce like shrill yet mellow accents of the clarionet, to stir the soul like the tumultuous voices of brass instruments. Sight and hearing, through their keener intellectual significance, dominate this harmony; even as treble and tenor chords of violin and viola control a symphony. The final object of the whole concert is to delight and stimulate the mind, not to exercise the brain by logical propositions, nor to excite the appetite by indecent imagery. Precisely in this attunement of all the senses to the service of impassioned thought lies the secret of the noblest art.

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● En qué esferas de la sensibilidad humana se desenvuelve lo artístico? ¿Cuál es la naturaleza del arte más noble, si se toma en cuenta tanto lo ético como la estimulación de lo sensorial inherente a la percepción del hombre? ¿Cuál es la finalidad del arte? A lo largo de cinco apartados, John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) perfila algunas respuestas a estas preguntas, planteando definiciones, puntos de contacto y diferencias entre la caricatura, lo fantástico, lo grotesco y lo obscuro.

La caricatura exhibe, a través de la exageración, los defectos de los individuos. Lo fantástico amplifica y distorsiona la realidad, creando figuras hermosas o terroríficas surgidas de una imaginación exaltada. Lo grotesco, como rama de lo fantástico, también incluye elementos caricaturescos. Y lo obscuro, ubicado por Symonds entre la caricatura y lo grotesco, permite la intervención de lo erótico y de lo que el autor denomina la indecencia, arma por demás poderosa para la caricatura satírica.

Como resultado de la reflexión acerca de los límites y fronteras difusas entre estas cuatro estéticas, asistimos en este texto a una disertación sobre el arte y la importancia de colocar lo sensorial en el centro de la contemplación artística.