

Chapter Six: Aesthetics and Atmosphere

Both the circle of the family and that of social intercourse are subjected to forces that are active in the entire social body, and that penetrate the entire atmosphere of human life in invisible channels. No one knows whence these currents, these ideas arise; but they are there. They influence the moods, the aspirations, and the inclinations of humanity, and no one, however powerful, can withdraw himself from their effects; no sovereign's command makes its way into their depths. They are often born of a genius to be seized upon by the multitude that soon forgets their author; then the power of the thought that has thus become active in the masses again impels the individual to energetic resolutions: in this manner it is constantly describing a remarkable circle.¹

Our Beauty Sense. —There is another region open to Intellect, of very great beauty and delight. He must needs have Imagination with him to travel there, but still more must he have that companion of the nice ear and eye, who enabled him to recognize music and beauty in words and their arrangement. The aesthetic Sense, in truth, holds the key of this palace of delights. There are few joys in life greater and more constant than our joy in Beauty, though it is almost impossible to put into words what Beauty consists in; color, form, proportion, harmony—these are some of its elements. Words give some idea of these things, and therefore some idea of Beauty, and that is why it is only through our Beauty Sense that we can take full pleasure in Literature.

Beauty in Nature. —But Beauty is everywhere—in white clouds against the blue, in the gray bole of the beech, the play of a kitten, the lovely flight and beautiful coloring of birds, in the hills and the valleys and the streams, in the wind-flower and the blossom of the broom. What we call Nature is all Beauty and delight, and the person who watches Nature closely and knows her well, like the poet

¹ Charlotte Mason, *School Education*

Wordsworth, for example, has his Beauty Sense always active, always bringing him joy.

We cannot get away from Beauty, and we delight in it most perhaps in the faces and forms of many little children and of some grown-up people.

The Palace of Art.—We take pleasure, too, in the arrangement and coloring of a nice room, of a nice dress, in the cover of a book, in the iron fittings of a door, when these are what is called artistic. This brings us to another world of beauty created for us by those whose Beauty Sense enables them not only to see and take joy in all the Beauty there is, but whose souls become so filled with the Beauty they gather through eye and ear that they produce for us new forms of Beauty—in picture, statue, glorious cathedral, in delicate ornament, in fugue, sonata, simple melody. When we think for a moment, how we must admire the goodness of God in placing us in a world so exceedingly full of Beauty—whether it be of what we call Nature or of what we call Art—and in giving us that sense of Beauty which enables us to see and hear, and to be as it were suffused with pleasure at a single beautiful effect brought to our ear or our eye.

The Hall of Simulation. —But, like all the good gifts we have received, this too is capable of neglect and misuse. It is not enough that there should be a Beauty World always within reach; we must see to it that our Beauty Sense is on the alert and kept quick to discern.

Our great danger is that, as there is a barren country reaching up to the very borders of the Kingdom of Literature, so too is there a dull and dreary Hall of Simulation which we may enter and believe it to be the Palace of Art. Here people are busy painting, carving, modeling, and what not; the very sun labors here with his photographs, and he is as good an artist as the rest, and better, for the notion in this Hall is that the object of Art is to make things exactly like life. So the so-called artists labor away to get the color and form of the things they see, and to paint these on

canvas or shape them in marble or model them in wax (flowers), and all the time they miss, because they do not see, that subtle presence which we call Beauty in the objects they paint and mold. Many persons allow themselves to be deceived in this matter and go through life without ever entering the Palace of Art, and perceiving but little of the Beauty of Nature. We all have need to be trained to see, and to have our eyes opened before we can take in the joy that is meant for us in this beautiful life.

The Intellectual Life. —I cannot tell you more now of the delightful and illimitable sources of pleasure open to Intellect and his colleagues; but, if you realize at all what has been said, you will be surprised to know that many people live within narrow bounds, and rarely step into either of the great worlds we have been considering. The happiness of the intellectual life comes of knowing and thinking, imagining and perceiving or rather, comes of the range of things, which we know and think about, imagine and perceive. Everybody's mind is occupied in these ways about something or other, but many people know and think about small matters. It is quite well to think of these for a little while, but they think about them always, and have no room for the great thoughts, which great things bring to us.

Thus, a boy's head may be so full of his stamp collection or of the next cricket match that there is no room in it for bigger things. The stamps and the cricket are all right, but it is not all right by any means to miss the opportunities of great interests that come to us and pass unnoticed, while we think only of these small matters. Not only so: boys and girls may be so full of marks and places, prizes and scholarships, that they never see that their studies are meant to unlock the door for them into this or that region of intellectual joy and interest. School and college over, their books are shut for ever. When they become men and women, they still live among narrow interests, with hardly an outlook upon the wide world, past or present. This is to be the slaves of knowledge and not its joyful masters. Let it be said of us as it was of the late Bishop of London, "His was the rare gift of mastering

knowledge as his splendid servant, not being himself mastered by it as its weary slave." ²

Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. What is the power of atmosphere? What are its influences in the 19th Century in the 21st Century?
2. Show that the beauty sense opens a paradise of pleasure.
3. Why do schools so often lack a beauty sense in their buildings, classrooms, and grounds? How does this affect the student?
4. Describe a school with beauty sense. Why is this important?
5. What kind of happiness does the intellectual life afford?
6. Contrast the boy with thoughts of his stamp collection and cricket games with the boy who has intellectual interests from books?

² Charlotte Mason, *Ourselves*.