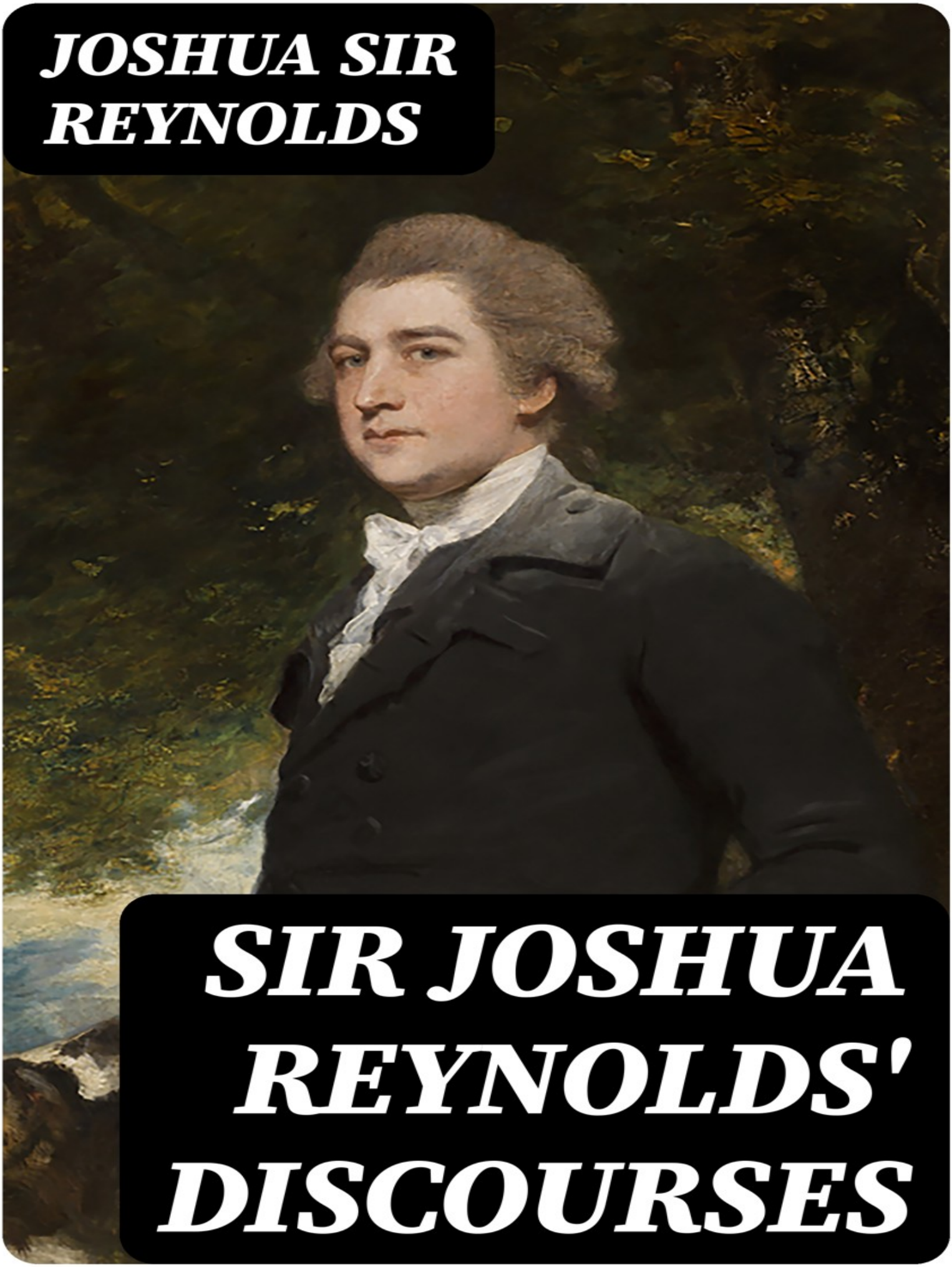
JOSHUA SIR REYNOLDS



SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS' DISCOURSES

Joshua Sir Reynolds

Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses

Edited, with an Introduction, by Helen Zimmern

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INTRODUCTION.

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Sir Joshua Reynolds—to whom is the name unfamiliar? to whom, hearing it, does not appear in mental vision the equally familiar autograph portrait of the deaf artist? This picture, painted originally for Mr. Thrale, shows us the painter "in his habit as he lived," spectacles on nose, ear-trumpet in hand—in short, exactly as he was known to his intimates in his latter days in domestic life. Another autograph picture of the artist in younger life hangs to-day in the National Gallery. Close by is seen the portrait by the same hand of his equally illustrious friend, bluff, common-sense Dr. Johnson, whom he represents as reading and holding his book close to his eyes after the manner of the short-sighted. It would seem that this mode of representation roused Dr. Johnson's ire. "It is not friendly," he remarked, "to hand down to posterity the imperfections of any person." This comment of the doctor's is equally characteristic of the man and his times. At so low an ebb was art and art criticism in those days, that people less learned than Johnson failed to grasp the truth of Reynolds' dictum, now become almost a commonplace, that a portrait but receives enhanced value as a human and historical document if it makes us acquainted with any natural peculiarity that characterises the person delineated. Johnson rebelled against the notion he deduced from this circumstance that Sir Joshua would make him known to posterity by his defects only; he vowed to Mrs. Thrale he would not be so known. "Let Sir Joshua do his worst, . . . he

may paint himself as deaf as he chooses, but I will not be blinking Sam."

In this anecdote, in this juxtaposition of two great names, each thoroughly representative of their epoch, can be traced both the cause of Sir Joshua's success, and of the difficulties against which he had to strive. Reynolds may with truth be named the father of modern English art, for before him English art can scarcely be said to have existed, since what was produced on British soil was chiefly the work of foreigners. The records even of this older art are sufficiently barren. It would appear that in the reign of Henry III. some foreign artists were invited over to decorate Winchester Castle, but of them and their works little trace remains. At the time when Italy was producing her masterpieces no native artist of whom we have record bedaubed canvas in Great Britain; and when the pomp-loving Henry VIII. wished to vie with his great contemporaries, Charles V., Leo X., and Francis I., he had to turn to the Continent for the men to execute his desires. That he himself had no true taste or love for the arts is well known; it was purely the spirit of emulation that prompted him. How crude were his own art notions may be gathered from the written instructions he left for a monument to his memory. They serve equally to illustrate the state of public taste in England at a period when Italy was inspired by the genius of Michael Angelo, of Raphael, and of Titian. The memorandum directs that "the king shall appear on horseback, of the stature of a goodly man; while over him shall appear the image of God the Father, holding the king's soul in his left hand, and his right extended in the act of

benediction." This work was to have been executed in bronze, and was considerably advanced when Elizabeth put a stop to its progress. It was afterwards sold by the Puritan parliament for six hundred pounds. Still, for all his own artistic incapacity, it is more than probable that had not Henry, for private domestic reasons, adopted the Reformed faith, England under his reign might have witnessed a prosperous art period, which, it is true, would not have been native art, but might have given impetus towards its birth. Thackeray was fond of saying that it was no idle speculation to suppose what would have happened had Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo. To those who love such fruitless mental sports it may prove no idle speculation to ponder what would have happened had Henry's amorous desires not led him to liberate himself and his nation from the bosom of the Catholic Church. Enough that the facts are there, and that with the first ardour of Protestant zeal there also made itself felt a chilling influence, casting a blight over literature and art, and more especially over art, till then so almost exclusively the handmaiden of religion, that a work of art came to be regarded as a symbol and remembrance of popery, and "painting and sculpture were conscientiously discouraged as tending to encourage idolatry and superstition and to minister to passion and luxury." Queen Mary, Elizabeth, and James I., each in their way gave some encouragement to foreign artists, such as Moro, Zucchero, and Mytens, but their patronage was purely personal, and did not operate upon the taste of the nation. More extended influence was exercised by Charles I. This monarch had a real love and understanding for art, and under him Rubens

and Vandyke employed their pencils. He also bought many pictures, and encouraged his nobles to do the like. At least, among the upper classes the narrow Puritan art views were greatly counteracted. But Charles had to lay his head upon the block, and Puritanism had fuller and more unchecked sway than ever before, creating influences which to this very day are not wholly extinct, though happily in their death throes. Their latest survival is the "British Matron" who writes to the *Times* denouncing modern pictures that displease her individual taste, and the artists, happily rare and few, who preach that the study of the nude and anatomy is no essential part of a painter's education.

After the death of Charles a general wreck of works of art ensued. Whatever survived the bigotry of the Puritans was sacrificed to supply their pecuniary necessities. A curious mixture of superstition and covetousness was displayed. The journals of the House of Commons of 1645 afford some interesting reading like the following:—"Ordered: that all pictures and sketches as are without superstition shall be forthwith sold for the benefit of Ireland and the north. Ordered: that all such pictures as have the representation of the Virgin Mary upon them shall be forthwith burnt. Ordered: that all such pictures as have the representation of the Second Person of the Trinity upon them shall be forthwith burnt." It seems, however, that these orders were not quite strictly executed. The Puritan conscience having been relieved by this edict, many prohibited pictures were sold at a high price to swell the coffers of the zealots. After this it is needless to remark that art did not flourish under the Commonwealth. With the Restoration we find Lely practising

his method of portrait-painting, succeeded by Sir Godfrey Kneller, neither, however, being Englishmen. The era of George I. produced as native painters, Richardson and Sir James Thornhill; under George II. Hudson flourished; it was reserved to the long reign of George III. to see the birth of what can be truly termed art, of what alone can measure itself with the nations of the Continent. Hogarth was the first upon the list, but Hogarth, inimitable as he is, was rather a satirist than an artist in the full acceptation of the term. Of beauty of draughtmanship, of colour, we find next to nothing in his canvasses. Together with him flourished Hudson, and a little later Wilson and Gainsborough, who, like himself, and, indeed, like all English artists up to that time, had imbibed their teaching through the medium of Flanders, producing exact and careful work—indeed, in Gainsborough's case, work of real beauty—but lacking on the side of poetical feeling and elevation. Such a method must be regarded as the infancy of art, its purely observant but unthinking side. It was reserved to Reynolds to open out to English understanding the vista of Italian art, with its glories, its perfections, and it is owing to his Discourses, even more than to his works, that this mighty revolution came about; a revolution so mighty, so important, that for its sake alone, had he never limned a canvas, the name of Reynolds should stand forth proudly in the annals of England. It was he who, coming to Italy, already in mature manhood, as a finished artist in the eyes of his countrymen, had the perception and the courage to admit before the works of Raphael and Michael Angelo that it was needful for

him "to become as a little child" and recommence his studies upon principles of which hitherto he was ignorant.

Joshua Reynolds was born at Plympton, in Devonshire, July 16th, 1723, the tenth child of the Rev. Samuel Reynolds, rector of Plympton and principal of the local grammar school. His father was the boy's only instructor. He had destined him, it would seem, for the medical profession, and Reynolds is known to have said in latter life that if this design had been carried out, "he should have felt the same determination to become the most eminent physician as he then felt to be the first painter of his age and country." It was, indeed, his decided opinion (an opinion modern psychology would hardly endorse) that "the superiority attainable in any pursuit whatever does not originate in an innate propensity of the mind for that pursuit in particular, but depends on the general strength of the intellect, and on the intense and constant application of that strength to a specific purpose." He held that ambition was the cause of eminence, but that accident pointed out the means. It is impossible to decide whether or no Reynolds illustrates his own theory, but from what he said in private, and also in his Discourses, many erroneous conclusions are drawn as to this point. As his biographer, Northcote, justly observes, Reynolds "never meant to deny the existence of genius, supposing the term to denote a greater degree of natural capacity in some minds than others; but he always contended strenuously against the vulgar and absurd interpretation of the word, which supposes that the same person may be a man of genius in one respect, but utterly unfit for, and almost an idiot in everything else; and that

this singular and unaccountable faculty is a gift born with us, which does not need the assistance of pains or culture, time or accident, to improve and perfect it."

Whatever Reynolds' private views on the subject of native taste asserting itself in the young, he himself undoubtedly showed a liking for art at an early age, and his taste was fostered by his father, himself an amateur possessing a small collection of anatomical and other prints. If Joshua's love of drawing did not interfere with his other studies, his father did not check it. Thus there is extant to this day a perspective drawing of a bookcase under which Mr. Reynolds has written, "Done by Joshua out of pure idleness." It is on the back of a Latin exercise. He copied such prints as he could find in his father's library, Jacob Cats's *Book of Emblems* furnishing him with the richest store. This his grandmother, who was a native of Holland, had contributed to the family bookshelves. When he was only eight years old he read with eagerness *The Jesuit's Perspective*, and so thoroughly did he master its rules that he never afterwards had to study any other works on the subject. An application of these rules to practice is preserved in a drawing of the grammar school at Plympton. It was so well done that the father exclaimed, "Now this exemplifies what the author of the 'Perspective' asserts, that by observing the rules laid down in this book a man may do wonders, for this is wonderful."

Visitors to the Reynolds' Exhibition, which was held in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1884, may remember this little drawing, which was among the exhibits.

Portraits of his family and friends next occupied Reynolds' youthful pencil, while his love of art was influenced by reading Richardson's *Treatise of Painting*. This book first awoke in him his enthusiastic adoration of Raffaelle (of whose works he had till then seen nothing), a love he cherished until the end of his days. At seventeen his liking for art showing no diminution, the father decided he should follow a painter's career, and took him to London, where he placed him under Hudson, the most eminent artist England could then boast. By a curious accident he was entered at Hudson's on St. Luke's day, the patron saint of art and artists. Hudson set him at work at copying, a system Sir Joshua afterwards strenuously condemned. His words on this matter, written in the 2nd Discourse, should be "read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested" by all art professors and students—they are golden words of wisdom.

Notwithstanding the master's inadequate teaching, the pupil made such progress that he aroused Hudson's jealousy, who, after two years' apprenticeship, found a pretext for dismissing him. Reynolds, with what he had learnt, continued to paint down in Devonshire, taking the portraits of the local magnates. How conventional his style was at first is proved by the following anecdote. It was a favourite attitude with the portrait-painters of the time to represent their model with one hand in waistcoat and the hat under the arm, convenient because it dispensed the artist from the difficult task of painting the hand. Now it happened that one gentleman, whose portrait Reynolds painted, desired to have his hat on his head. The picture, which was quickly finished and posed in a commonplace

attitude, was done without much study. When sent home, it was discovered, on inspection, that although this gentleman in his portrait had one hat upon his head, there was another under his arm.

For three years Reynolds painted in Devonshire, and certainly improved greatly under his own instructions and those of William Gandy of Exeter, so that some of the works of this period are undoubtedly fine. During these first years of seclusion he taught himself to think as well as to paint; and that the labour of the mind is the most essential requisite in forming a great painter is a doctrine he constantly inculcates in his Discourses, distinguishing it from that of the hand. He aptly applied the dictum of Grotius —"Nothing can come of nothing"—to demonstrate the necessity of teaching.

The more Reynolds thought, however, the less was he satisfied with his own performances, and that he did not see himself progress with greater speed no doubt fretted him the more, inasmuch as he had early declared it his fixed opinion that if he did not prove himself the best painter of his time, when arrived at the age of thirty, he never should. For the completion of his studies he unceasingly felt that he must visit Italy, and behold with his own eyes those masterpieces of which he had heard so much. Chance offered him a passage to the Continent in the flagship of Viscount Keppel, and thus, at the age of twenty-six, May 11th, 1749, Reynolds first set sail for the Continent, and for the land of his desires and aspirations.

On Sir Joshua's death papers were found on which were written a number of detached thoughts, jotted down as

hints for a Discourse, never written, in which the artist intended to give a history of his mind, so far as it concerned his art, his progress, studies, and practice. One of these fragments narrates his feelings on first seeing the treasures of Italian art, and is sufficiently remarkable. "It has frequently happened," he writes, "as I was informed by the keeper of the Vatican, that many of those whom he had conducted through the various apartments of that edifice, when about to be dismissed, have asked for the works of Raffaelle, and would not believe that they had already passed through the rooms where they are preserved; so little impression had these performances made on them. One of the first painters in France told me that this circumstance happened to himself; though he now looks on Raffaelle with that veneration which he deserves from all painters and lovers of art. I remember very well my own disappointment when I first visited the Vatican; but on confessing my feelings to a brother student, of whose ingenuousness I had a high opinion, he acknowledged that the works of Raffaelle had the same effect on him; or rather, that they did not produce the effect which he expected. This was a great relief to my mind; and, on inquiring farther of other students, I found that those persons only who from natural imbecility appeared to be incapable of ever relishing these divine performances, made pretensions to instantaneous raptures on first beholding them. In justice to myself, however, I must add, that though disappointed and mortified at not finding myself enraptured with the works of this great master, I did not for a moment conceive or suppose that the name of Raffaelle and those admirable

paintings in particular owed their reputation to the ignorance and prejudice of mankind; on the contrary, my not relishing them, as I was conscious I ought to have done, was one of the most humiliating things that ever happened to me. I found myself in the midst of works *executed upon principles with which I was unacquainted*. I felt my ignorance, and stood abashed.

"All the indigested notions of painting which I had brought with me from England, where the art was at the lowest ebb—it could not indeed be lower—were to be totally done away with and eradicated from my mind. It was necessary, as it is expressed on a very solemn occasion, that I should become *as a little child*. Notwithstanding my disappointment, I proceeded to copy some of those excellent works. I viewed them again and again; I even affected to feel their merits and to admire them more than I really did. In a short time a new taste and new perceptions began to dawn upon me, and I was convinced that I had originally formed a *false opinion of the perfection of art*, and that this great painter was well entitled to the high rank which he holds in the estimation of the world.

"The truth is, that if these works had been really what I expected, they would have contained beauties superficial and alluring, but by no means such as would have entitled them to the great reputation which they have long and so justly obtained."

It must, of course, be borne in mind, reading these words, that Sir Joshua Reynolds had not the advantages put into the way to-day, not only of art students, but of every person more or less interested in art, in the way of copies,

photographs, autotypes, from the works and drawings of the great masters. He had to learn to understand, and he at once put himself into the attitude of the learner, humbly assured that the fault in appreciation must be in himself, not in those masterpieces. His good sense told him that "the duration and stability of their fame is sufficient to evince that it has not been suspended upon the slender thread of fashion and caprice, but bound to the human heart by every tie of sympathetic approbation."

"Having since that period," continues Sir Joshua, "frequently revolved the subject in my mind, I am now clearly of opinion that a relish for the higher excellences of the art is an acquired taste, which no man ever possessed without long cultivation and great labour and attention. On such occasions as that which I have mentioned, we are often ashamed of our apparent dulness, as if it were expected that our minds, like tinder, should instantly catch fire from the divine spark of Raffaelle's genius. I flatter myself that *now* it would be so, and that I have a just perception of his great powers; but let it be remembered that the excellence of his style is not on the surface, but lies deep, and at the first view is seen but mistily. It is the florid style which strikes at once, and captivates the eye, for a time, without ever satisfying the judgment. Nor does painting in this respect differ from other arts. A just poetical taste, and the acquisition of a nice discriminative musical ear, are equally the work of time. Even the eye, however perfect in itself, is often unable to distinguish between the brilliancy of two diamonds, though the experienced jeweller will be amazed at its blindness; not considering that there

was a time when he himself could not have been able to pronounce which of the two was the most perfect, and that his own power of discrimination was acquired by slow and imperceptible degrees."

From the first Reynolds avoided making copies, and had refused lucrative orders. He sketched portions of pictures, such as he thought would help his own comprehension, but he would do no slavish imitation. "The man of true genius," writes Sir Joshua, "instead of spending all his hours, as many artists do while they are at Rome, in measuring statues and copying pictures, soon begins to think for himself, and endeavour to do something like what he sees. I consider general copying," he adds, "as a delusive kind of industry: the student satisfies himself with the appearance of doing something; he falls into the dangerous habit of imitating without selecting, and labouring without a determinate object; as it requires no effort of mind, he sleeps over his work, and those powers of invention and disposition which ought particularly to be called out and put into action lie torpid, and lose their energy for want of exercise. How incapable of producing anything of their own those are who have spent most of their time in making finished copies, is an observation well known to all those who are conversant with our art."

His own precise method of study is not known, but it may be assumed that he was chiefly occupied in reasoning on what he observed. Elsewhere he writes—"A painter should form his rules from pictures rather than from books or precepts; rules were first made from pictures, not pictures from rules. Every picture an artist sees, whether the most

excellent or the most ordinary, he should consider whence that fine effect or that ill effect proceeds, and then there is no picture ever so indifferent but he may look at it to his profit." "The artist," he observes, "who has his mind filled with ideas, and his hand made expert by practice, works with ease and readiness; whilst he who would have you believe that he is waiting for the inspirations of genius, is in reality at a loss how to begin, and is at last delivered of his monsters with difficulty and pain. The well-grounded painter, on the contrary, has only maturely to consider his subject, and all the mechanical parts of his art will follow, without his exertion."

The mode of study which Sir Joshua adopted himself he continually recommends to the students: "Instead of copying the touches of those great masters, copy only their conceptions; instead of treading in their footsteps, endeavour only to keep the same road; labour to invent on their general principles and way of thinking; possess yourself with their spirit; consider with yourself how a Michael Angelo or a Raffaelle would have treated this subject, and work yourself into a belief that your picture is to be seen and criticised by them when completed; even an attempt of this kind will raise your powers.

"We all must have experienced how lazily, and consequently how ineffectually, instruction is received when forced upon the mind by others. Few have been taught to any purpose who have not been their own teachers. We prefer those instructions which we have given ourselves from our affection to the instructor; and they are more

effectual from being received into the mind at the very time when it is most open to receive them."

Having stayed in Rome as long as his resources allowed, Sir Joshua visited Florence, Venice, and some of the smaller Italian towns, everywhere adopting the same careful, observant method of study. After an absence of nearly three years he returned to England, feeling himself indeed a mentally richer, wiser man than he set out.

It was after his return from Italy that Reynolds took up his permanent abode in London, then, as now, the only true centre for art or literature. At first he met much opposition; Hudson especially was fiercely critical over Reynolds' new style, saying to him, "You don't paint so well now as you did before you went to Italy." Another eminent portrait-painter of the time, now long since consigned to oblivion, shook his head sadly on seeing one of Sir Joshua's finest portrait works, saying, "Oh, Reynolds, this will never answer: why, you don't paint in the least in the manner of Kneller." And when the artist tried to expose his reasons, his rival, not able to answer him, left the room in a fury, shouting, "Damme! Shakespeare in poetry, and Kneller in painting; damme!"

Nevertheless, Reynolds soon became a favourite with the public, and his painting-room a fashionable resort. To this end his courtly manner and agreeable conversation may greatly have aided. By the year 1760 he had become the most sought for portraitist of his day, and was making as much as £6000 a-year, in those days a very large sum for an artist to earn, especially as the price he charged for his

portraits was very low as compared with modern artistic demands.

It was in 1759 that Reynolds first put down some of his artistic ideas in writing. He contributed three papers to the *Idler*, then edited by Dr. Johnson, with whom he had, on coming to London, formed that friendship which lasted all their lives. They are the Numbers 76, 79, and 82, and are reprinted in this volume.

"These papers," observes Northcote, "may be considered as a kind of syllabus of all his future discourses; and they certainly occasioned him some thinking in their composition. I have heard Sir Joshua say that Johnson required them from him on a sudden emergency, and on that account he sat up the whole night to complete them in time; and by it he was so much disordered that it produced a vertigo in his head."

The following year, 1760, the one in which Reynolds removed to his larger residence in Leicester Square, is memorable in the annals of English art. It witnessed the first public exhibition of modern paintings and sculptures, and proved so satisfactory that it was repeated, and finally laid the foundation for what became the Royal Academy. The catalogue to one of these first exhibitions was penned by Dr. Johnson, and is written in his usual pompous style. The worthy doctor had little appreciation for the fine arts, and in a private letter to Baretti, speaking of this innovation, he says: "This exhibition has filled the heads of artists and lovers of art. Surely life, if it be not long, is tedious; since we are forced to call in the assistance of so many trifles to rid us of our time—of that time which never can return."

In 1768 the Royal Academy was founded by royal charter, and was opened January 1, 1769. Reynolds had been elected its President, and in accordance with the custom that prevails to this day, received, together with this dignity, the compliment of knighthood. On this occasion he delivered the first of his Discourses, in which, mingled with general instructions concerning the purpose and method of art, we find the needful servile adulation of the reigning sovereign. The second, far more able and to the point, was delivered at the end of the same year on the occasion of the distribution of prizes to the students. It contains his admirable views with regard to copying. From henceforth, on the same occasion, every two years, when the gold medals are given, up to December 1790, Sir Joshua delivered such an address to the students, making in all fifteen Discourses that are read with pleasure to this day. At the last the hall was so crowded that a beam supporting the floor actually gave way with the weight. That outsiders should have been so eager to come is astonishing on this account, that Reynolds, like most Englishmen, had no powers of elocution. His manner in delivering his speeches was shy and awkward, and he often spoke so low that those at some distance could not hear him. His deafness in a measure may have accounted for this, for, like all deaf people, he could not modulate his voice; but yet more, his truly British horror lest he should seem to be posing as an orator.

It was no part of Sir Joshua's prescribed duty as President to deliver an address on the presentation of medals; but, "if prizes were to be given," he himself remarked in the last

Discourse, "it appeared not only proper, but indispensably necessary, that something should be said by the President on the delivery of those prizes; and the President, for his own credit, would wish to say something more than mere words of compliment; which, by being frequently repeated, would soon become flat and uninteresting, and, by being uttered to many, would at last become a distinction to none. I thought, therefore, if I were to preface this compliment with some instructive observations on the art, when we crowned merit in the artists whom we rewarded, I might do something to animate and guide them in their future attempts."

It was, perhaps, the fact that Reynolds intended this Discourse to be his last, his farewell to the Academy he had served so long and well, that attracted such a crowd. In it he takes a review of all his past Discourses, and ends with commending to the students the works of his idol, Michael Angelo. It was a source of joy to him that the last word he spoke in that hall was the name of this adored master. "I felt a self-congratulation in knowing myself capable of such sensations as he intended to excite. I reflect, not without vanity, that these Discourses bear testimony of my admiration of that truly divine man; and I should desire that the last words which I should pronounce in this Academy, and from this place, might be the name of *Michael Angelo*!"

Before the next occasion for a Discourse occurred Reynolds was quietly sleeping his eternal sleep in St. Paul's Cathedral, having died February 23, 1792, after two years' suffering, borne with cheerful fortitude.

There are those who think that English art has rather retrograded than progressed since the days of Reynolds. To those who speak thus it is only needful to tell that Pliny already spoke of painting as a "dying art." After this we need reason with such blind admirers of antiquity *quâ* antiquity no farther. That Reynolds was a great artist is universally admitted beyond dispute; but to speak of him as the greatest, as unapproachable henceforward, is as absurd as to claim, as did his contemporaries, that anything so able as his art discourses had never been penned. These were above all impressed by the undoubted influence Johnson had upon Reynolds' style, giving it that pedantic ring, that monotony of cadence, that want of colour, which is precisely what we moderns least admire. We should hardly assent to the contemporary lines lauding Dr. Johnson and saying—

> "To fame's proud cliff behold our Raphael rise,
> Hence Reynolds' pen with Reynolds' pencil
> vies."

But then, in any case, such fulsome flattery is not in accordance with the spirit of our century. We might, too, now-a-days think it dubious praise that Johnson, after reading one of his friend's essays and praising it in general, should pick out one passage in particular with the remark —"I think I might as well have said this myself." More valuable we should consider the praise of Burke, who, writing to Mr. Malone, says, "I have read over some part of the discourses with an unusual sort of pleasure. . . . He is always the same man, the same philosophical, the same

artist-like critic, the same sagacious observer, with the same minuteness, without the smallest degree of trifling."

This is true; Sir Joshua's polished mind and calm philosophical observation makes itself felt in every line of his writings.

There was a time when envious calumny disputed the authorship of these Discourses, attributing them now to Burke, now to Johnson. The imputation is too futile to need refutation. There are those who deny to any man the merit of having written his own works, commencing with Homer and Shakespeare. This is a strange craze of the critical mind. Seeing the work is the result of a human hand, why not, for example, allow that Shakespeare wrote what he claims as his own, in lieu of attributing the authorship to Lord Bacon? Again, why should there not have been a Homer as there was a Dante, in lieu of an aggregation of men? A very petty and despicable envy, or the frantic desire of saying something new and strange to attract attention to ourselves, may be pronounced the motor force of such theories.

Reynolds' Discourses may be described as the first attempt in the English language at what may be called a philosophy of art. To this day there are in English few works of this character. A science corresponding to the German *Aesthetik* does not exist in English, for what modern cant has dubbed æstheticism, the child's play of "passionate Brompton" and languishing South Kensington, must on no account be confounded with a real serious study that in German universities fills a special chair. The cause for this lack is no doubt to be sought in the vastly diverse genius of

the two nations. The German is nothing if not abstract; the Englishman nothing if not positive; and on this account the English take art, as well as all else, from the practical side. To mention but a few German works of this character. Hegel has written a philosophy of the fine arts scarcely less valuable to art-students and painters, and perchance even as unknown to the latter—for artists are rarely readers—as the works of the same class written by Winckelmann and Lessing. Reynolds addressed an audience not merely of readers and theoreticians, but of actual workers, practical students; and he strove, therefore, to combine theory with positive facts, hoping thus to bridge over the gulf which made, and still unhappily makes, English art-students learn their profession too much by mere rule of thumb. That Reynolds' work is neither final nor all-embracing goes without saying. The mere fact that these lectures were delivered but rarely, forming no designed sequence, would have hindered such an end, even had Reynolds' knowledge been sufficient to accomplish it. Under the circumstances, it is sufficiently remarkable that they really form so complete a whole as they undoubtedly do. The one leading idea that informs them is the necessity for the student to study the works of the great masters, above all of the Roman and Tuscan schools; and on this doctrine, then so new, Reynolds could not insist enough. In his last Discourse, with great modesty he sums up so ably what he has achieved, that it is best to let him speak for himself. After saying how unequal he had been to the expression of his ideas, he continues:—

"To this work, however, I could not be said to come totally unprovided with materials; I had seen much, and I had

thought much upon what I had seen; I had something of a habit of investigation, and a disposition to reduce all that I had observed and felt in my own mind to method and system; but I thought it indispensably necessary well to consider the opinions which were to be given out from this place, and under the sanction of a Royal Academy; I therefore examined not only my own opinions but likewise the opinions of others.

"In revising my discourses, it is no small satisfaction to be assured that I have in no part of them lent my assistance to foster *newly-hatched unfledged opinions*, or endeavoured to support paradoxes, however tempting may have been their novelty, or however ingenious I might, for the minute, fancy them to be; nor shall I, I hope, anywhere be found to have imposed on the minds of young students declamation for argument, a smooth period for a sound precept. I have pursued a plain and *honest method*; I have taken up the art simply as I found it exemplified in the practice of the most approved painters. That approbation which the world has uniformly given, I have endeavoured to justify by such proofs as questions of this kind will admit; by the analogy which painting holds with the sister arts, and consequently by the common congeniality which they all bear to our nature. And though in what has been done no new discovery is pretended, I may still flatter myself that from the discoveries which others have made from their own intuitive good sense and native rectitude of judgment (in allusion to the works of the old masters) I have succeeded in establishing the rules and principles of our art on a more

firm and lasting foundation than that on which they formerly had been placed."

It is worthy of note, as yet another proof of Sir Joshua's justice of judgment and objectivity, that, speaking of portrait-painting (*Discourse III.*), he puts it low in rank among the various departments of painting. He strove with all his power to elevate English art methods, to lead artists to practice what he named the "grand style," and it was on this account that he ever and always held up to imitation the gods of his idolatry, Michael Angelo and Raffaelle. What he writes concerning *pittori improvisatori* may well be laid to heart to-day when Impressionism threatens to swamp genuine study and careful draughtsmanship. Indeed, looked at from all sides, Sir Joshua's *Discourses* worthily take rank among the English classics, and it has been truly said that "with Reynolds' literature was the playmate of art, and art became the handmaiden of literature."

That detractors have not been lacking is a matter of course, but Reynolds, like others, can console himself with Goethe's lines—

"Die schlechsten Früchte sindd es nichtt
Woran die Wespen nagen."

Some of these objections merit reproduction. Who can read, for instance, without a smile, the words of Blake, that sweet, childlike mind, which was at once so penetrative and so uncritical? The smile will of course be one of gentle sympathy, such as one ever accords to that wayward genius. He writes in his notes—

"Whether Reynolds knew what he was doing is nothing to me. The mischief is the same whether a man does it ignorantly or knowingly. I always considered true art and true artists particularly insulted and degraded by the reputation of these discourses; as much as they were degraded by the reputation of Reynolds' paintings, and that such artists as Reynolds are, at all times, hired by Satan for the depression of art; a pretence of art to destroy art."

Once Blake finds a passage after his own heart: "A firm and determined outline is one of the characteristics of the great style of painting!" Against which is written, "Here is a noble sentence! a sentence which overthrows all his book."

With no more than justice he remarks on the very weakest feature in Sir Joshua's system: "Reynolds' opinion was, that genius may be taught, and all pretence to inspiration is a lie or deceit, to say the least of it. If it is deceit, the whole Bible is madness." Of the *Third Discourse* he energetically avers: "The following discourse is particularly interesting to blockheads, as it endeavours to prove that there is no such thing as inspiration, and that any

man of plain understanding may, by thieving from others, become a Michael Angelo." Again—

> "No real style of colouring now appears,
> Save through advertisements in the
> newspapers;
> Look there—you'll see Sir Joshua's colouring;
> Look at his pictures—all has taken wing."

Again, when Reynolds tells his hearers that "enthusiastic admiration seldom promotes knowledge,"—"And such is the coldness with which Reynolds speaks! And such is his enmity! Enthusiastic admiration is the first principle of knowledge and its last. How he begins to degrade, to deny, and to mock! The man, who, on examining his own mind, finds nothing of inspiration, ought not to dare to be an artist. He is a fool and an amusing knave suited to the purposes of evil demons. The man who never in his mind and thought travelled to Heaven is no artist. It is evident that Reynolds wished none but fools to be in the arts, and in order to compass this, he calls all others rogues, enthusiasts, or madmen. What has reasoning to do with the art of painting?"

It is evident that Blake has not always fully followed Reynolds' meaning. Indeed, Sir Joshua is at times a little obscure, a circumstance his detractors did not overlook, nicknaming him Sir Obadiah Twylight, and classifying his style as "sub-fusk."

Concerning this *Third Discourse*, which deals with the grand style and the right imitation of nature, an anecdote is preserved. West was at the time painting his picture of the

"Death of Wolfe." When it was understood that he meant to paint the characters as they actually appeared on the scene, the Archbishop of York called on Reynolds and asked his opinion concerning this. Both visited West and endeavoured to dissuade him. West, firm in his rejection of the classic dress, replied, "I want to mark the place, the time, and the people, and to do this I must abide by truth."

When the picture was finished he called Sir Joshua to see it. Reynolds seated himself before the canvas and examined it with interest for half-an-hour, and then, rising, said, "West has conquered; he has treated the subject as it ought to be treated." So just was Reynolds' mind that he could admit the truth even when it opposed his own theories.

Ruskin has also contributed his quota to the Reynolds controversy. Writing in his favourite antithetic style, he says:—

"Nearly every word that Reynolds wrote was contrary to his own practice; he seems to have been born to teach all error by his precept, and all excellence by his example; he enforced with his lips generalisation and idealism, while with his pencil he was tracing the patterns of the dresses of the belles of the day; he exhorted his pupils to attend only to the invariable, while he himself was occupied in distinguishing every variation of womanly temper; and he denied the existence of the beautiful at the same instant that he arrested it as it passed, and perpetuated it for ever."

Thus to Sir Joshua's lot, as to all who put themselves before the world, has fallen a portion of praise and blame; but the best praise that can be accorded a man's work is that it should survive him, and continue to arouse interest