THE SPIRITUAL VALUE OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

THERE are but two conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture.

RUSKIN.

Archæology—architecture have revealed to us simply the organism, the bodies, of the cathedrals. Who will tell us of their souls ?

J. R. HUYSMANS.

Mohammedan Architecture has recently been criticised by a German Roman Catholic writer[1] as wanting in spiritual content. There is a direct reference in this criticism to the absence of the human form in mural carving, and to the fact that most of the decoration is geometrical in design. To me this judgment seems much the same as if one were to deny spiritual value to a fugue by Bach in comparison with the sensuous music of a Mass—or to a masterly scientific demonstration as compared with a lyric. In each of these contrasted pairs the material employed and moulded is the same, and the agent is human intelligence suffused and inspired and informed by human emotion. Who is going to define what are the limits of spiritual value in these cases,—the limits of vitality and spirituality ?

There are great differences between the subject matter of Christian iconography and Mohammedan impersonality in design, between the melting music of later composers and the austerity of contrapuntal composition, and between the strictly regulated operations of scientific demonstration and the passion of poetry. But can these differences be said to determine, where one or other form and content are spiritual or otherwise ? One kind is expansive ; constantly reminiscent, and unconstrainedly suggestive ; the other bracing, astringent, reserved. Both kinds have

(1) Joseph Dahlmann, S. J. *Indische Fahrten.*

their beauty, and positive beauty too. The reaction of the human mind to fate itself may be momentous after any one of these experiences: Beethoven is surely no greater than Bach for his more pathetic consolation for certain moods; Milan or Burgos no more moving for their wealth of statuary than Granada or Delhi; the revelation of an epithalamium no more entrancing than celestial exploration.

For whom? may of course be asked.

For Arthur Symons the mosque has "no solemnity, no mystery; it is a place of closed-in silence, shut in even from the sky, in a paradise of abstract art." But he recognises an æsthetic culmination in Mohammedan architectural decoration: "Nothing so brilliant was ever imagined by a Gothic carver, so full of light, so airy, so serpentine in swiftness."

There are minds which find their supreme satisfaction in representations of the Family of Jesus of Nazareth, in rhythmic expression of passion, in verbal or tonal melody and harmony. And there are others which crave an expression that is remote from the personal, that is correlative to our finite existence, that suggests something very different from the ceaseless surge of emotion in which human life is immersed.

Mohammedan ornamentation at its best—and here we are only concerned with the best of everything—is characterised by a deliberate turning away from human passion, from idolatry, from the redundant and the excessive, and this renunciation also involves limitation of formal scheme. Art without form is of course unthinkable, but there are kinds of art in which the content bursts through the form, in which the form is obliterated by the passion expressed.

Mohammedan decorative art, which is, after all, "the workers' expression of joy in his work" (the essential of all art recognised by Ruskin and Rodin), in so far as it denies itself exuberance also denies itself certain qualities of spiritual expression; but it finds its compensation in restraint, in contrast with external and unmastered rhythms, in a sanity which reduces thought and feeling to a cool and calm synthesis. And thus it is true to Islamic tradition in its fusion of the moral and the æsthetic.

It loses greatly in range of appeal, of course, in refusing to portray gradations of emotional tension in human form;

but in contrast with the extravagance of non-Muslim sculpture in India how striking a foil it offers to the sensational everywhere around it, a riot of excess, wild often as the rocky jungle which the presence of a tomb or a mosque will marvellously subdue. Of it can truly be said, as Prof. Lethaby says of all true buildings, that "it touches depths of feeling and opens the gates of wonder."

Indeed there is this added grandeur in Islamic architecture that it not only humanizes a landscape but stands there with all its simplicity of form as a witness to the Divine. How this comes about it is not easy to say: it is not entirely because a tomb reminds us of our return to God who is our home, or because a mosque is a call to prayer. It is perhaps partly because the spirit of sacrifice and devotion shines through it: many of the buildings are prayers in stone, long, slow prayers that accompany the passing of the years. It is also due to some mysterious influence in the simple forms to which Mohammedan architects reduced their freedom of suggestion, and a wise simplicity is always a source of strength, always suggests far more than it expresses. Here, of course, we are passing beyond the ultimate purpose of the buildings which are the chief monuments of Mohammedan art,—just as we pass beyond the ultimate origin of their form, whether in forest hut, Egyptian granary dome or Turanian kibitka.

Ruskin goes so far as to say that "all forms of acknowledged beauty are composed exclusively of curves;" he associates decay or ruin or death with straight lines. But in the wider sense of life, to an understanding of which the world is coming, decay and death are also directions of movement, and their symbols must have their place in art. There is a great deal of art, especially in the Orient, which rarely admits such symbols of the static as straight lines and rectangles; but there is also much which employs these as details of contrast, symbols, as it were, of temporary station in the flux of life, of human construction defying the elements. In the finest Mohammedan architecture great use is made of the contrast of rectangle and curve, and the one is never allowed to dominate the other. It is a fusion of two directly opposed formal elements, just as all art must be a fusion of apparent incompatibles. If it seems to resist the life-movement, to be less a matter of instinctive urge than of geometrical calculation, that does not affect the spiritual value, which is conditioned by the total appeal made to the conscious and subconscious

organism of the beholder. "All architecture" said, Whitman, "is what you do to it when you look upon it."

From the wearisome iteration of mediæval Catholic iconography we so often turn for relief and interest to the non-essentials of the picture, just as one brought up in the traditions of such ecclesiastical art longs for a touch of the human in Islamic architecture. Power to represent the human figure and human life was highly developed by Mohammedan artists of Persia and India, and for some years the Western world, in its ceaseless hunt for new sensations, has been finding interest in such paintings, with their subtle power of supporting character by the most delicate play of line. For Europe art is largely illustration, as for the Hindus it is a storehouse of heroic and divine legend. But the Mohammedan's conception of art is by contrast rather as a symbol of discipline and restraint, as a refuge from action and an inducement to meditation, than as an expression of the exuberance or dance of life. In this way it is a crystallization of his personality, his love of repose, his urbanity and avoidance of waste of energy. It is a revelation of the ideals by which he feels his life should be guided. At its worst, in modern architecture, with its miniature domes and balconies and other feeble excrescences—cruet-stand architecture, it has been called—it reveals a love of empty show on a basis of solidity. At its best, it is a noble blending of stability and austere beauty. "The architect, with blocks of primeval mud hardened into rock beneath an extinct ocean, builds a great cathedral which stirs us by its majesty." So writes an American astronomer[1], and the spiritual conquest of matter by the Mohammedan architect bears the same witness throughout Islam. A. E's poetic and suggestive juxtaposition of national evolution and architecture might very well give a lead to young Muslims, to whom it may never have occurred:

"The State is higher in the scale of being than the individual, and it should be dominated solely by moral and intellectual principles. These are not the outcome of passion or prejudice, but of arduous thought. National ideals must be built up with the same conscious deliberation of purpose as the architect of the Parthenon conceived its lofty harmony of shining marble lines, or as the architect of Rheims Cathedral designed its intricate magnificence and mystery."

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(1) George Ellery Hale.

If A. E. had such a knowledge of India herself as he has of some of her sacred books, he might have added—whether the inspiration came from its Muslim builders or was the spirit of India itself, as Havell maintains—" as the architect of the Tâj Mahall combined with a rare instinct for the value of architectural mass an exquisite sense of decorative elaboration."

There is in the Mohammedan mosque and tomb an extensive range of appeal to mind and heart, from the delicate carving like the handiwork of frost, or the finish and loveliness of clusters of moss, to the solemnity of walls like those of fortress or mountain cliff. Some work, like that of the marble carving in the royal serail at Delhi is like an enlargement of missal designs ; some, like that of the mausoleum of Mîrzâ Jehângîr, vies with the beauty of leaf-shadows at sunrise. There is decoration of pillars and cornices which is as beautiful as that of the finer lacquer work of the Far East ; and exquisite sandstone relief in Fatehpur, midway between the wind-borne beauty of nature and human convention. Some carving, as that of the minarets of the Queen Mosque, at Ahmedabad, is as rich in detail as Hindu carving, without a trace of the grotesque. The mausolea of Salîm Chisti, 'Itemâd-ud-Daulah, and the interior of the Tâj Mahall seem to be revelations of deep sorrow transmitted into dreams of such loveliness as the hand of man can only reveal when guided by supernal powers.

In contrast to these we have the massive perfection of such buildings as the tombs of Sheikh Ahmed in Sirkij, of Muhammad Ghaus in Gwaliar, of Adil Shah in Bijapur, and many others in which the instinct of the artist and the faithful toil of the artizans have devised and achieved such blendings of perfect and perfectly correlated abstract forms that deeply impressive sensations are induced, of mystery, awe and infinity. It is as though, in the words of Ruskin, man were striving to reveal his " reverent worship and following, not only of the spirit which rounds the pillars of the forest, and arches the vault of the avenue —which gives veining to the leaf, and polish to the shell, and grace to every pulse that agitates animal organization—but of that also which reproves the pillars of the earth, and builds up her barren precipices into the coldness of the clouds, and lifts her shadowy cones of mountain purple into the pale arch of the sky."

A good deal of ground seems to move away from under our feet if we feel constrained to be believe in Havell's

dictum that : " The Arabs, Tartars, Mongols and Persians who came into India had much to learn from Hindu civilization, and it was from what they learnt and not from what they taught that Mohammedan art in India became great. The Tâj Mahall belongs to India, not to Islam." But he answers this himself when he says a little later :

" It may, however, be urged quite reasonably and plausibly that, in spite of the Buddhist-Hindu derivation and resemblances in matter of detail, there is in the whole conception, especially in the purity, simplicity, and subtlety of the contours of the domes, a wide world of difference between the Tâj or the Môti Masjid at Agra and the fantastic elaboration of most Hindu temples." Exactly so, and this wide world of difference is a spiritual one, radical and obvious, but none the less too subtle to express in words.

There is in the Tâj nothing of the gloom and seclusiveness of Hindu temples, nothing of the darkness before dawn. It is a flower unshadowed by any foliage, a cluster of shells permeated by sunshine flashed from an invisible sea, with its wonderful dome globed from the passing loveliness. It offers welcome and peace to all, and it is the seal of a spirit world remote from the Hindu complex, with its endless need of propitiations, its innumerable fears and semi-human obsessions. It stands there as a token of what human devotion can attain to, and it has all the largeness of intent and achievement which characterized those great men whom the passes of the North-West and the turbulent rivers of the Himalayan gorges could no more daunt than the fiercest wild creature of the forest or the most formidable conjunctions of fate. It sings a clear song and it symbolizes much that for its builders is but the shadow of a dream.

From a philosophical point of view, to deny spiritual value to a body of art which constitutes some of the salient manifestations of human genius is a proceeding highly irrational, quite apart from the fact that the forms of architecture criticised were erected as tokens of reverence. The word spiritual may be regarded in relation to the nature of an object or to the effect an object produces on the human mind. Spiritual and material are only directly opposed, of course, in the vague way of thinking of the man in the street. The antithesis disappears on deeper thought. One philosopher will regard matter and spirit

as two different mode of the underlying reality; another sees energy or spirit in all matter; and the reasoning of a third leads to his system of thought being called philosophy of spirit, and to the statement that the final truth is: Everything is spirit, and spirit is everything.

The creation of these great works of architecture was the result of very pronounced spiritual activity. The effect on the people for whom they were intended is very distinctly an effect of spiritual reaction; and as for others not conversant with or susceptible to Muslim tradition, the many kinds of beauty enshrined in such buildings compels the spiritual activities of wonder and praise. It is a sheer spiritual attraction that draws travellers from all over the world, the bulk of them non-Muslim in sympathy, to satisfy cravings they cannot express by being in the presence of such moving examples of man's spiritual transformation of the shapeless rocks of earth. Some of them have attempted to tell us what they have felt in such surroundings, and from their words we are conscious of more than they were able to utter. Here is the testimony of a very matter-of-fact Englishman, one of the great surgeons of his day, the late Sir Frederick Treves. Speaking of the Môti Masjid, he says:

"As a place of prayer it is simple and chaste. Shadows of amber and brown fill its recesses as with incense. It is open to the sky, and the sky is blue. It is open to the sun, and the sun floods its courts and cloisters. The least devout must feel that it is a holy place, pure and spotless, and filled with the silent benediction of peace.

"Any who would wish to fashion in their minds the most sufficing picture of a man in prayer could possibly find no spot in the world more fitting for such realization than the Pearl Mosque. The square would be empty save for the sun; shadows alone would occupy the white aisles; and, kneeling on the marble of the court, with only the heavens above him, would be the figure of a solitary man prostrate in prayer, with his turbaned head touching the stone.

"The Pearl Mosque would better become this kneeling figure than would the steps before the high altar in St. Mark's at Venice, or the Sistine Chapel at Rome. These places are grand, resplendent and elaborate. The Pearl Mosque can claim only a divine simplicity, and that access to Heaven which belongs to an unruffled mere of white water."

The frontispiece of his book, *The Other Side of the Lantern*, is a very beautiful photograph he calls "The Garden of the Unforgotten," in which are the graves of the Princess Jahanara, and those of the poets Amîr Khusrau and Nizâmuddîn.

Of this exquisite place Treves wrote: "Without the wall of this garden of memories is only a desert of violence and oblivion; yet within there would seem to have fallen upon the white cloister and its mosque that Peace of God which passeth all understanding."

Moreover, the deeper we go in individual reflection the stronger is the testimony to the spiritual value of art whose effect is not due to association of ideas. Kant expresses this very definitely:

"In the English manner of laying out gardens, in musical compositions, in the plastic arts, the single elements co-operate immediately to produce a total impression which satisfies a very essential spiritual need in us."

Kant, says Hoffding, to quote further, "lays very great weight on the entire immediacy of the æsthetic judgment, and undervalues the more remote ideas which the pictures may have excited. He only recognizes *free* beauty as such; secondary beauty has no right to the name of beauty, since it presupposes certain ideas. A flower, an arabesque, a musical fantasia are examples of free beauty; the beauty of a human being is secondary, because it presupposes an idea of that which is called a man."

Mohammedans proscribe the use of the human form in pictures for very different reasons than that of secondary beauty; their reasons are a continuation of folklore survivals and detestation of idolatry. But nevertheless it is remarkable that while one type of German thinker, the devout Jesuit, can find no spiritual compulsion in the finest examples of Islamic architecture, another type, the master-philosopher, finds exactly in those examples the purest appeal to the spirit—art of a noble cathartic power, no mere illustrations of the human life about us but an appeal to a higher reason, above the disturbing waves of human emotion, such as Ruskin urged as fitting decoration for a church.

Both the austere thinker of the misty, icebound Baltic shores, and the warriors of the burning deserts of the South, stand in this respect in the strongest contrast to the sculptors of the Florentine School, of whom Pater wrote: "The creation of man had haunted the mind of the Middle

Ages like a dream ; and weaving it into a hundred carved ornaments of capital or doorway, the Italian sculptors had early inpressed upon it that pregnancy of expression which seems to give it many veiled meanings." And how different are the Mosque and the Tomb, which lead one away to silence and rest of heart, from the ceaseless call to the senses enumerated by a recent writer on the Gothic cathedral :

" The cathedral was a Bible, the Old Testament was figured without, the New Testament within. The very tiles of the pavements gave teaching as the worshippers trod them ; the wave-patterns imaged the Sea of Glass, the fish were an emblem of baptism, the winding and convoluted maze showed the difficult journey of life ! The animal world and the vegetable world were brought in to share in the cosmos of the cathedral : teeming with life and variety is the sculpture on capitals and arcadings, it is almost the wild luxuriance of Nature itself. And there was meaning in the Gothic flora ; it was not acanthine, classically monotonous and symmetrically inane. The vine and its branches are shown for Christ and his followers ; the palm stands for victory and for justice, the cypress typifies the Just made ready for their death. Here too, are animals in stone ; the Lamb of God, the goat, the Lion of Judah, the serpent accursed ; and birds, the raven and the dove. The oxen which drew the great blocks of granite across the plain to the site of the cathedral are sculptured here, and not for ornament only ; man, woman, child, angel, muses, sibyl, and musician are shown. Five thousand statues and statuettes stand here, each the image of some living thing, some being, concept, quality or state. Even crimes and vices are personified, to show comprehensiveness and pardon, and that " it takes all sorts to make a world." Hell and the fiends themselves are not omitted ; witness the cynical gargoyles, and the devils of Notre-Dame. Here, too, are effigies of all trades, arts, crafts and occupations, the whole story of mankind, the fall of Adam, and human regeneration ; here are the chronicles and parables of God."

Here are associative factors and illustration with a vengeance! And that is why, to later ages, with different ways of thinking and an insight into the story of mankind the world never dreamed of in those Middle Ages, except by such men as Brüno, who were not allowed to live, the cathedrals have become little more than museums. No wonder man turned from them in time to the simple

conventicle, to the Friends' Meeting House, as the Mosque might also well be named. Islamic architecture had also its wealth of decoration, and the origin and symbolism of it are deeply interesting to follow down to their origins by the banks of the great rivers of Africa and Assyria, but they were not a matter of consciousness to the worshippers, nor were they felt as "classically monotonous and symmetrically inane." The Mariolatrous cathedrals of France tell their own story. There is nothing farfetched in interpreting their meaning as Sir James Yoxall has done. Architecture and theology worked side by side to build them, as the record clearly stands to-day. Further, it is obvious that: "A cathedral was meant to be lofty and universal; it was to lift itself as a divine work and image of the infinite." But with Islamic religious architecture there is no such patient reflection of the life around; the buildings do not talk to you as such a cathedral does, with a thousand voices. They are quiet as the ancient mountains. They are not treatises on orthodoxy, but they may assuredly be termed symbols of the four great things which Ruskin preached with prophetic fervour to his own age,—Obedience, Unity, Fellowship and Order.

There is a further point to be noted. It is not merely a question as to whether arabesque and geometrical design, on surface and in planes, can be more spiritual than architecture adorned by representations of ideal human figures and scenes. It is a question of whether the ardour of the faith which inspired the master builders has informed the architecture to such a degree that a distinct and powerful inpression is made upon the observer, of personality behind the mass of stone whose inertness has been transmuted into living beauty which, though rooted in the dark earth, blends with the sunshine and the storm, the far-travelled lights of noon and midnight, the trees and waters and human life around, as no other creation of the human mind.

Of the ardour of Islamic faith there can be no more question than of the unique and solemn, as well as radiant beauty of the great monuments of the architecture of Islam. This beauty is now often a beauty of ruin, which so often induces regret and melancholy in the beholder. But is there not something forbidding in perfection, whether of the Tâj or the Parthenon? And is it not a very ancient human feeling that such perfection and finish invite disaster? A Japanese student told me that his landlady would never allow all the paper windows to

be in order: she would always make a hole in one of the tiny panes. Rodin leaves so much of his work still a part of the virgin rock, as though unwilling to lose his power over it, perhaps from the same intention which Novalis expressed so strikingly:

"With each portion perfected the work separates itself from the master by immeasurable distances; and with the last lines the master has his work separated from himself by a spiritual abyss of which he himself is scarcely able to conceive the extent."

All Islamic cities are in ruin, and rarely is there an effort from inside to retain perfection. I am not at all sure that this is to be explained as mere neglect. It may be due to some pre-Islamic superstition hinted at in what I have just mentioned, or it may be the carelessness of the artistic spirit—the work is done, and therefore done with. And it may be in part due to some subconscious theory of beauty such as that expressed by the Arab poet Zohair, of whom Abu'l 'Ala wrote:

Zohair the poet sang of loveliness
which is the flight of things—

a thought which we find hovering like a butterfly in the mind of a modern English poet, Walter de la Mare:

Look thy last on all things lovely
Every hour—

and made memorable of old by Augustine:

The lovely forms a moment's sparkle gave
Then fell and mingled with the falling wave.
So perish all things fair, to re-adorn
The Beauteous One whence all fair things were born.

E. E. SPEIGHT.