Théophraste Renaudot (1586-1653)

General Collection of Discourses of the Virtuosi of France

Conference LVIII.

I. Of the Sight. II. Of Painting.

An ignorant Philosopher was he, who pull’d out his eyes that he might the better Philosophize; since, on the contrary, ‘tis by the sight that we have cognition of all the goodly objects of the world, the ornament and agreeable variety of which seem purposely made to gratifie this Sense; whose excellence and priviledge appears in that ‘tis free from the condition requisite to all the other Senses, viz. that their objects be at a moderate distance; for it discerns as far as the Stars of the Firmament, knows more things then they (there being nothing but has some light and colour, which are its objects) and that most exactly, distinguishing even their least differences; yea it hath this of divinity, that it acteth in an instant, being no more confin’d to time then place, and much more certain then any of the other Senses. And as it alone were left in the free enjoyment of its own rights, there’s none besides it that hath the power to exercise or not exercise its function, as it lifts; the muscles of the eye-lids serving to open and close the curtain when it pleaseth, whereas all the rest are constrain’d to do their offices when their objects are present. Moreover, man’s noblest faculty, the Understanding, is call’d the Eye doth to the Body, which guides and governs. And therefore, in the dark, which hinders the use of his sense, the most daring are not without some fear which cannot proceed from the black colour, as some hold, but from our being destitute of our guide and conductor, which serves for a sentinel to us to discover such thing as are hurtful, for in the same darkness we are pretty confident in case we be in the company of persons that can conduct us, and supply the use of our own eyes.

The Second said, Were it not for custom which renders all thing common, there would be nothing so admir’d as the Eye, which, as small as it is, gives reception to all corporeal things of what magnitude soever; yea every one is represented there in its own natural proportion, though the species of an Elephant be no bigger in mine Eye than that of a Flye; and nevertheless the Senses judge of their objects by the species streaming from them. And the convex fabrick of the eye representing a mirror, seems
to argue that we do not behold objects in their true magnitude, but very much smaller than they are. For we see things so as they are receiv’d in the eye. But they are receiv’d there as the visible species are in Looking-glasses, which if plain represent the same in their true magnitude; if spherical, as the eye is, render them much smaller. And nevertheless we see things in their just proportion. Whence ‘tis to be concluded that our Sight which is the most certain of all the Senses is in a perpetuall, yea a general errour, which consequently is no longer an errour, since to erre is to deviate from rule, which is a general law. Moreover, this too is wonderful in the Sight; that all the other Organs make several reports to the Senses; one accounts that hot which another judges cold or tepid; one taste seems fresh to one which another thinks too fai; they are of one opinion in odours and sounds, and these are of another; though their Organs be rightly dispos’d. But that which appears black to one seems so likewise to every body else. And if the Sight happen to be deceiv’d, s when we judge the Moon greater in the Horizon by reason of the vapours of the earth then when she is in the Meridian; or when a straight stick seems crooked in the water; the same eye which is deceiv’d finds its own errour by comparison of other objects. Hence ariseth the doctrine of the Parallaxes, and the rules of Opticks, Catoptricks, and Dioptricks, which are practis’d by the sight. So that as he doth not perfectly delire who knows that he is in a delirium, so the sense cannot be said altogether faculty when it discerns its fault. Which the other senses do not.

The Third said, The excellence of the Sight will be better understood by considering its contrary, Blindness, and the misery of the Blind; their life being an image of death, whilst they pass it in perpetual darkness. Therefore the Civilians exclude them from publick Offices; because, say they, they cannot perceive, nor consequently esteem the badges, and ensigns of their Magistracy. Moreover, the Egyptians thought nothing fitter to represent their Deity then the figure of the Eye, which the Stoicks call a god, others a divine member, and the Luminary of the little World; Theophrastus, Beauty, because it resides principally in the Eyes, the most charming part of a handsome face. Their colour, twinkling, fixedness,, and other dispositions serve the Physiognomists for certain indications of the inclinations of the soul, which all antiquity believ’d to have its seat in the eyes; in which you read pride, humility, anger, mildness, joy, sadness, love, hatred, and the other humane affections. And as the inclinations and actions of men are more various then those of other creatures, so their eyes alone are variously colour’d; whereas the eyes of all breasts of the same
species are alike. Yea the eyes are no less eloquent then the tongue, since they express our conceptions by a dum but very emphatical language; and a twinkle of the eye many times moves more to obedience then speech. Plato being unable to conceive the admirable effects of the Sight without somewhat of divinity, believ’d there was a celestial light in the eye, which issuing forth to receive the outward light, brought the same to the soul to be judg’d of; which nevertheless we perceive not in the dark, because then the internal streaming forth into the obscure air, which is unlike to it self, is alter’d and corrupted by it. Indeed, if it be true that there is a natural light in the eye? considering too that the Organs ought to have a similitude and agreement with their objects. And hence it is that the eyes sometimes flash like lightning in the night, as Cardan saith his did; and Swetonious relates the same of Tiberius; and that those that are in a Phrensy imagine that they see lightning. For it seems to me more rational to refer this Phænomenon to the lucide and igneous spirits of the light, which being unable to penetrate the crystalline or vitreous humour by reason of some gross vapours, reflect back into the eye, and make those flashes; then to the smoothness of the eye, or to attrition of the spirits, or, as Galen holds, to an exhalation caus’d by the blood which is carri’d to the head; though this latter may sometimes be a joynt cause.
The Third said, The Eye is compos’d of six Muscles, as many Tunicles, three Humours, two pair of Nerves, and abundance of small Veins and Arteries: its object is every thing that is visible, as colour, light and splendor; light, in the Celestial Bodies, wherein the object and the medium are two, for colour cannot be seen without light; splendor, in the scales of Fishes, rotten wood, the eyes of some animals, Gloe-worms and the like; for it is different from their natural colour. Its Organ is the Eye, so regarded by Nature that she hath fortifi’d it on all sides for its safety, with the bone of the Forehead, the Eye-brows, the Eye-lids, the hair thereof, the Nose, the rising of the Cheeks, and the Hands to ward off outward injures; and if Galen may be believ’d, the Brain it self (the noblest part of the body) was made only for the eyes; whence Anaxagoras conceiv’d that men were created only to see or contemplate. The Eyes are dearer to us then any other part; because saith Aristotle, they are the instruments of most exact knowledge, and so serve not only for the body but the soul; whose food is the knowledge which the eye supplies, call’d for this reason the Sense of Invention, as the Ear is that of discipline. ‘Tis of an aqueous nature, because it was requisite that it should be diaphanous, to receive the visible species and light; for if it had been of a terrestrial matter, it would have been opake and dark; if aerious, or igneous, it could not have long retain’d the species; air and fire being thin diaphanous bodies which receive well but retain not; for though the air be full of the species of objects which move through it from all parts, yet they are not visible in it by reason of its rarity. It was fit therefore that the Eye should be of a pellucid and dese substance, that it might both receive and retain the visible species; which kind of represents. Moreover, the Eye being neer, and conjoin’d to the Brain by the Nerves of the first and second conjugation, and to the membranes thereof by its Tunicles, could not be of an igneous nature perfectly contrary to that of the Brain, as Plato held it to be because of its agility, lucidity and orbicular figure, like that of fire (as he said) and because the Eye is never tense or stiff as all the other parts; all which he conceiv’d could not be but from fire. For the Eyes agility or nimbleness of motion is from its Muscles and its lubricity; its brightness, from the external light; its round figure rather denotes water, whose least particles are so, then fire whose figure is pyramidal. ‘Tis never stiff, because of the fat wherewith it is stuff’d, and because it is destitute of flesh.

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General Collection of Discourses of the Virtuosi of France, Upon Questions of all Sorts of