

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

ART
AND
MORALITY

BY

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ART AND MORALITY.

ART is the highest form of expression, and exists for the sake of expression. Through art thoughts become visible. Back of the forms is the desire, the longing, the brooding, creative instinct, the maternity of mind, the passion that gives pose and swell, outline and color.

Of course there is no such thing as absolute beauty or absolute morality. We now clearly perceive that beauty and conduct are relative. We have outgrown the provincialism that thought is back of substance, as well as the old Platonic absurdity, that ideas existed before the subjects of thought. So far, at least, as man is concerned, his thoughts have been produced by his surroundings, by the action and inter-action of things upon his mind; and so far as man is concerned, things have preceded thoughts. The impressions that these things make upon us are what we know of them. The absolute is beyond the human mind. Our knowledge is confined to the relations that exist between the totality of things that we call the universe and the effect upon ourselves.

Actions are deemed right or wrong according to experience and the conclusions of reason. Things are beautiful by the relation that certain forms, colors, and modes of expression bear to us. At the foundation of the beautiful will be found the fact of happiness, the gratification of the senses, the delight of intellectual discovery and the surprise and thrill of appreciation. That which we call the beautiful wakens into life through the association of ideas, of memories, of experiences—through suggestions of pleasure past and the perception that the prophecies of the ideal have been fulfilled.

Art cultivates and kindles the imagination, and quickens the conscience. It is by imagination that we put ourselves in the place of another. When the wings of that faculty are folded, the master does not put himself in the place of the slave; the tyrant is not locked in the dungeon, chained with his victim. The inquisitor did not feel the flames that devoured the martyr. The imaginative man, giving to the beggar, gives to himself. Those who feel indignant at the perpetration of wrong, feel for the instant that they are the victims; and when they attack the aggressor they feel that they are defending themselves. Love and pity are the children of the imagination.

A little while ago I heard a discussion in regard to the genius of George Eliot. The gentleman who appeared as her champion took the ground that she was a very great novelist, a most wonderful writer, and gave as a reason that her books were written with a distinct moral purpose; that she was endeavoring to inculcate the value of character, of integrity, of an

absolute and utter devotion to duty, to the glory and heroism of self-denial; that she did not create characters for the sake of Art, but that under all, and in all, and over all, was the desire to teach and enforce some moral truth.

Upon this very question George Eliot has given her views with great force and beauty: "On its theoretic and perceptive side, morality touches science; on its emotional side, art. Now, the products of art are great in proportion as they result, from that immediate prompting of innate power which we call genius, and not from labored obedience to a theory or rule; and the presence of genius, or innate prompting, is directly opposed to the perpetual consciousness of a rule. The action of faculty is imperious, and excludes the reflection *why* it should act. In the same way, in proportion as morality is emotional, *i.e.*, has affinity with art, it will exhibit itself in direct sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule. Love does not say, 'I ought to love'; it loves. Pity does not say, 'It is right to be pitiful'; it pities. Justice does not say, 'I am bound to be just'; it feels justly. It is only where moral emotion is comparatively weak, that the contemplation of a rule or theory mingles with its action, and in accordance with this we think experience, both in literature and life, has shown that the minds which are pre-eminently didactic, which insist on a 'lesson,' and despise everything that will not convey a moral, are deficient in sympathetic emotion."

"A certain poet is recorded to have said that he wished everything of his burned that did not impress

some moral; even in love-verses it might be flung in by the way.'

What poet was it who took this medicinal view of poetry? Dr. Watts, or James Montgomery, or some other singer of spotless life and ardent piety? Not at all. It was Waller. A significant fact in relation to our position, that the predominant didactic tendency proceeds rather from the poet's perception that it is good for other men to be moral, than from any overflow of moral feeling in himself. A man who is perpetually thinking in apothegms, who has an intermittent flux of admonition, can have little energy left for simple emotion."

This tendency, this "disposition to see a rebuke or a warning in every natural object," was called by George Eliot the "pedagogic fallacy"; and yet a gentleman well acquainted with her writings gives a reason for the admiration he entertains for her genius that she would have repudiated with the greatest warmth.

Nothing to the true artist, to the real genius, is so contemptible as the "medicinal view."

John Quincy Adams had the goodness to write his views about some of the plays of Shakespeare. He read "Othello," and read it for the purpose of finding out what lesson Shakespeare was endeavoring to teach. Mr. Adams gravely tells us that the play was written for two purposes; first, to impress upon the minds of men and maidens that no one should marry out of his or her blood; and second, that where a girl married contrary to the wishes of her parents she rarely ever came to any good. He regarded Shakespeare very much as he did a New England minister, and supposed

that he wrote "those plays" for the purpose of inducing children to mind their mothers.

Probably Mr. Adams believed that "Romeo and Juliet" was written for the one purpose of bringing vividly before the mind the danger of love at first sight, and that "Lear," the greatest tragedy in human speech, was produced to show that fathers could not safely divide their property among their children.

Our fathers read with great approbation the mechanical sermons in rhyme written by Milton, Young and Pollok. Those theological poets wrote for the purpose of convincing their readers that the mind of man is diseased, filled with infirmities, and that poetic poultices and plasters tend to purify and strengthen the moral nature of the human race.

Poems were written to prove that the practice of virtue was an investment for another world, and that whoever followed the advice found in those solemn, insincere and lugubrious rhymes, although he might be exceedingly unhappy in this world, would with great certainty be rewarded in the next. These writers assumed that there was a kind of relation between rhyme and religion, between verse and virtue; and that it was their duty to call the attention of the world to all the snares and pitfalls of pleasure. They wrote with a purpose. They had a distinct moral end in view. They had a plan. They were missionaries, and their object was to show the world how wicked it was and how good they, the writers, were. They could not conceive of a man being so happy that everything in nature partook of his feeling; that all the birds were singing for him, and singing by reason of his joy;

that everything sparkled and shone and moved in the glad rhythm of his heart. They could not appreciate this feeling. They could not think of this joy guiding the artist's hand, seeking expression in form and color. They did not look upon poems, pictures, and statues as results, as children of the brain fathered by sea and sky, by flower and star, by love and light. They were not moved by gladness. They felt the responsibility of perpetual duty. They had a desire to teach, to sermonise, to point out and exaggerate the faults of others and to describe the virtues practised by themselves. Art became a colporteur, a distributor of tracts, a mendicant missionary whose highest ambition was to suppress all heathen joy.

Happy people were supposed to have forgotten, in a reckless moment, duty and responsibility. True poetry would call them back to a realisation of their meanness and their misery. It was the skeleton at the feast, the rattle of whose bones had a rhythmic sound. It was the forefinger of warning and doom held up in presence of a smile.

These moral poets taught the unwelcome truths, and by the paths of life put posts on which they painted hands pointing at graves. They loved to see the pallor on the cheek of youth, while they talked, in solemn tones, of age, decrepitude, and lifeless clay.

Before the eyes of love they thrust, with eager hands, the skull of death. They crushed the flowers beneath their feet and plaited crowns of thorns for every brow.

According to these poets, happiness was inconsistent with virtue. The sense of infinite obligation should be perpetually present. They assumed an attitude of

superiority. They denounced and calumniated the reader. They enjoyed his confusion when charged with total depravity. They loved to paint the sufferings of the lost, the worthlessness of human life, the littleness of mankind, and the beauties of an unknown world. They knew but little of the heart. They did not know that without passion there is no virtue and that the really passionate are the virtuous.

Art has nothing to do directly with morality or immorality. It is its own excuse for being; it exists for itself.

The artist who endeavors to enforce a lesson becomes a preacher; and the artist who tries by hint and suggestion to enforce the immoral, becomes a pander.

There is an infinite difference between the nude and the naked, between the natural and the undressed. In the presence of the pure, unconscious nude, nothing can be more contemptible than those forms in which are the hints and suggestions of drapery, the pretence of exposure, and the failure to conceal. The undressed is vulgar, the nude is pure.

The old Greek statues, frankly, proudly nude, whose free and perfect limbs have never known the sacrilege of clothes, were and are as free from taint, as pure, as stainless, as the image of the morning star trembling in a drop of perfumed dew.

Morality is the harmony between act and circumstance. It is the melody of conduct. A wonderful statue is the melody of proportion. A great picture is the melody of form and color. A great statue does not suggest labor; it seems to have been created as a joy. A great painting suggests no weariness and no

effort; the greater, the easier it seems. So a great and splendid life seems to have been without effort. There is in it no idea of obligation, no idea of responsibility or of duty. The idea of duty changes to a kind of drudgery that which should be, in the perfect man, a perfect pleasure.

The artist, working simply for the sake of enforcing a moral, becomes a laborer. The freedom of genius is lost, and the artist is absorbed in the citizen. The soul of the real artist should be moved by this melody of proportion as the body is unconsciously swayed by the rhythm of symphony. No one can imagine that the great men who chiselled the statues of antiquity intended to teach the youth of Greece to be obedient to their parents. We cannot believe that Michael Angelo painted his grotesque and somewhat vulgar "Day of Judgment" for the purpose of reforming Italian thieves. The subject was in all probability selected by his employer, and the treatment was a question of art, without the slightest reference to the moral effect, even upon priests. We are perfectly certain that Corot painted those infinitely poetic landscapes, those cottages, those sad poplars, those leafless vines on weather-tinted walls, those quiet pools, those contented cattle, those fields flecked with light, over which bend the skies, tender as the breast of a mother, without once thinking of the ten commandments. There is the same difference between moral art and the product of true genius, that there is between prudery and virtue.

The novelists who endeavor to enforce what they are pleased to call "moral truth," cease to be artists. They create two kinds of characters—types and cari-

captures. The first never has lived, and the second never will. The real artist produces neither. In his pages you will find individuals, natural people, who have the contradictions and inconsistencies inseparable from humanity. The great artists "hold the mirror up to nature," and this mirror reflects with absolute accuracy. The moral and the immoral writers—that is to say, those who have some object besides that of art—use convex or concave mirrors, or those with uneven surfaces, and the result is that the images are monstrous and deformed. The little novelist and the little artist deal either in the impossible or the exceptional. The men of genius touch the universal. Their words and works throb in unison with the great ebb and flow of things. They write and work for all races and for all time.

It has been the object of thousands of reformers to destroy the passions, to do away with desires; and could this object be accomplished, life would become a burden, with but one desire; that is to say, the desire for extinction. Art in its highest forms increases passion, gives tone and color and zest to life. But, while it increases passion, it refines. It extends the horizon. The bare necessities of life constitute a prison, a dungeon. Under the influence of art the walls expand, the roof rises, and it becomes a temple.

Art is not a sermon, and the artist is not a preacher. Art accomplishes by indirection. The beautiful refines. The perfect in art suggests the perfect in conduct. The harmony in music teaches without intention the lesson of proportion in life. The bird in his song has no moral purpose, and yet the influence is humanising.

The beautiful in nature acts through appreciation and sympathy. It does not browbeat, neither does it humiliate. It is beautiful without regard to you. Roses would be unbearable if in their red and perfumed hearts were mottoes to the effect that bears eat bad boys and that honesty is the best policy.

Art creates an atmosphere in which the proprieties, the amenities, and the virtues unconsciously grow. The rain does not lecture the seed. The light does not make rules for the vine and flower.

The heart is softened by the pathos of the perfect.

The world is a dictionary of the mind, and in this dictionary of things genius discovers analogies, resemblances, and parallels amid opposites, likeness in difference, and corroboration in contradiction. Language is but a multitude of pictures. Nearly every work is a work of art, a picture represented by a sound, and this sound represented by a mark, and this mark gives not only the sound, but the picture of something in the outward world and the picture of something within the mind, and with these words which were once pictures, other pictures are made.

The greatest pictures and the greatest statues, the most wonderful and marvellous groups, have been painted and chiselled with words. They are as fresh to-day as when they fell from human lips. Penelope still ravel, weaves, and waits; Ulysses' bow is bent, and through the level rings the eager arrow flies; Cordelia's tears are falling now. The greatest gallery of the world is found in Shakespeare's book. The pictures and the marbles of the Vatican and Louvre are faded, crumbling things, compared with his, in which perfect

color gives to perfect form the glow and movement of passion's highest life.

Everything except the truth wears, and needs to wear, a mask. Little souls are ashamed of nature. Prudery pretends to have only those passions that it cannot feel. Moral poetry is like a respectable canal that never overflows its banks. It has weirs through which slowly and without damage any excess of feeling is allowed to flow. It makes excuses for nature, and regards love as an interesting convict. Moral art paints or chisels feet, faces and rags. It hides with drapery what it has not the genius purely to portray. Mediocrity becomes moral from a necessity which it has the impudence to call virtue. It pretends to regard ignorance as the foundation of purity and insists that virtue seeks the companionship of the blind.

Art creates, combines, and reveals. It is the highest manifestation of thought, of passion, of love, of intuition. It is the highest form of expression, of history and prophecy. It allows us to look at an unmasked soul, to fathom the abysses of passion, to understand the heights and depths of love.

Compared with what is in the mind of man, the outward world almost ceases to excite our wonder. The impression produced by mountains, seas, and stars is not so great, so thrilling, as the music of Wagner. The constellations themselves grow small when we read "Troilus and Cressida," "Hamlet" or "Lear." What are seas and stars in the presence of a heroism that holds pain and death as naught? What are seas and stars compared with human hearts? What is the quarry compared with the statue?

Art civilises because it enlightens, develops, strengthens, and ennobles. It deals with the beautiful, with the passionate, with the ideal. It is the child of the heart. To be great it must deal with the human. It must be in accordance with the experience, with the hopes, with the fears, and with the possibilities of man. No one cares to paint a palace, because there is nothing in such a picture to touch the heart. It tells of responsibility, of the prison of the conventional. It suggests a load, it tells of apprehension, of weariness and ennui. The picture of a cottage, over which runs a vine, a little home thatched with content, with its simple life, its natural sunshine and shadow, its trees bending with fruit, its hollyhocks and pinks, its happy children, its hum of bees, is a poem—a smile in the desert of this world.

The great lady, in velvet and jewels, makes but a poor picture. There is not freedom enough in her life. She is constrained. She is too far away from the simplicity of happiness. In her thought there is too much of the mathematical. In all art you will find a touch of chaos, of liberty; and there is in all artists a little of the vagabond—that is to say, genius.

The nude in art has rendered holy the beauty of woman. Every Greek statue pleads for mothers and sisters. From these marbles came strains of music. They have filled the heart of man with tenderness and worship. They have kindled reverence, admiration, and love. The Venus de Milo, that even mutilation cannot mar, tends only to the elevation of our race. It is a miracle of majesty and beauty, the supreme idea of the supreme woman. It is a melody in marble. All

the lines meet in a kind of voluptuous and glad content. The pose is rest itself. The eyes are filled with thoughts of love. The breast seems dreaming of a child.

The prudent is not the poetic ; it is the mathematical. Genius is the spirit of abandon ; it is joyous, irresponsible. It moves in the swell and curve of billows ; it is careless of conduct and consequence. For a moment the chain of cause and effect seems broken ; the soul is free. It gives an account not even to itself. Limitations are forgotten ; nature seems obedient to the will ; the ideal alone exists ; the universe is a symphony.

Every brain is a gallery of art, and every soul is, to a greater or less degree, an artist. The pictures and statues that now enrich and adorn the walls and niches of the world, as well as those that illuminate the pages of its literature, were taken originally from the private galleries of the brain.

The soul—that is to say the artist—compares the pictures in its own brain with the pictures that have been taken from the galleries of others and made visible. This soul, this artist, selects that which is nearest perfection in each, takes such parts as it deems perfect, puts them together, forms new pictures, new statues, and in this way creates the ideal.

To express desires, longings, ecstasies, prophecies, and passions in form and color ; to put love, hope, heroism, and triumph in marble ; to paint dreams and memories with words ; to portray the purity of dawn, the intensity and glory of noon, the tenderness of twilight, the splendor and mystery of night, with sounds ; to give the invisible to sight and touch, and to enrich the common things of earth with gems and jewels of the mind—this is Art.

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