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ART AND ETHICS

IN SOME OF THEIR RELATIONS.

We would not have our youth grow up amid images of moral deformity, as in some noxious pasture, and there feed daily upon many a baneful flower and herb, until their souls are filled with poison. But let our artists be gifted to discern the true nature of beauty and grace : then shall our youth dwell in a healthful land amid sweet sights and sounds ; and the effluent beauty of fair works will meet the sense like a pure breeze, and draw the soul into harmony with the beauty of reason.—PLATO'S *Republic*, Book III.

MATTHEW ARNOLD, who is eminent both as poet and as critic, says that "poetry is at bottom the criticism of life." He does not mean this for a definition ; if so, it were inexact and worthless. But he means to declare in a luminous way the deep relations between the arts, (of which poetry is the highest,) and ethics. These relations have been virtually denied by two classes of men from utterly hostile stand-points. On the one hand an extreme school of art-critics has proclaimed that the fine arts lie wholly outside of the province of morality, are not to be judged by an ethical standard ; for art is a law and an end unto itself. This is the doctrine of the *unmorality* of art. On the other hand an extreme school of moralists has proclaimed that art is essentially evil ; that its very nature is contrary to ethics ; that the only relation between them is one of direct and irreconcilable conflict, which should be ended by the destruction of art. This is the doctrine of the *immorality* of art. At the outset we must meet these opposing theories.

The first question is one of jurisdiction. Are ethical judgments valid in regard to works of art ? May pictures and poems be tried under the laws of right and wrong ? Does the domain of ethics extend over the territory of art ; or is this a

free and independent realm, subject only to the laws of form, color, and rhythm?

The men who make this declaration of independence base it on the ground of the essential difference between the good and the beautiful. The end of art, they say, is beauty in the object and pleasure in the beholder. If these are gained the art is perfect: the aim of its being is fulfilled; we have no right to demand anything more. I have not been able to find a clearer, bolder statement of this theory than that which has recently been made by the infant phenomenon of this school of criticism, who is himself a practitioner, altho feeble, of one of the arts. He tells us, "We should never talk of a moral or immoral poem. Poems are either well written or badly written, that is all. Any element of morals or implied reference to a standard of good or evil in art is often a sign of a certain incompleteness of vision. All good work aims at purely artistic effect."

It must be confessed that this doctrine has some difficulties even from an æsthetic point of view; for it forces us to the conclusion that Homer, the Greek Tragedians, Dante, Shakspeare, and Milton were inferior in "completeness of vision" to Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Wilde. But then it is a doctrine easy to adopt in the abstract, and agreeable to practise in the concrete; and for people who do not care for the trouble of hard thinking it opens a graceful and comfortable way of escape from the painful region of moral distinctions. Therefore it is fashionable. It has many adherents, and an active tho somewhat secret propaganda. It must be met face to face; the question must be fairly considered. Is the autonomy of art to be conceded?

Observe, first of all, how false and unsubstantial is the ground on which the claim is based. The fact that the immediate end of art is pleasure by no means proves that this is, or ought to be, its highest and only end, by no means justifies the freedom of art from moral law. The end of commerce is wealth, but who will maintain that for this reason the merchant may not be judged by an ethical standard, that he cannot do things right or wrong, but only things profitable or unprofitable? That would be a glaring *non sequitur*. Equally great is the absurdity of the man who declares that because the end of

his life is to paint beautiful pictures he may forget the difference between good and evil, or because he proposes to write in an exquisite metre he may blamelessly celebrate the pleasures of cruelty and lust.

If moral law exist it must be supreme. To deny its authority in any one sphere of human life is to overthrow it entirely. If there be any such qualities as right and wrong they belong to all parts and activities of man. And this is true under any theory of the origin and nature of ethics.

Let us take our stand for a moment with W. K. Clifford on the ground of tribal ethics. We have trained our consciences to approve as right "those actions which tend to the advantage of the community in the struggle for existence." No man shall keep any part of his life in which this aim is not controlling, for there is no sphere of human conduct which is not related to the welfare of the tribe; and the last to claim exemption from this law should be the artist, for he is the man whose works most powerfully influence the thoughts and lives of others. If he is painting pictures which teach our young men and maidens to delight in scenes of lust or violence, if he is writing poems which glorify selfishness, cruelty, luxury, we say, "In the name of the tribe I condemn this as wrong." It will not do to answer that it is beautiful, exquisitely fashioned, that it aims solely at an artistic effect of colors and words. If it be not for the good of the community it should not be made. If it be for the harm of the community it must be destroyed. It matters not tho every law of beauty be fulfilled: the prosperity of the tribe is the highest consideration, and works of art must be judged finally by their relation to this end.

When, therefore, one of these precious gentlemen who profess to exhibit in art all things which they deem beautiful without regard to any moral quality or standard, comes along, we will treat him after the manner advised by Socrates. We will fall down and worship him as an utterly sweet and wonderful being; but we shall be under the painful necessity of telling him that there is no room for him in our country, the law will not tolerate him. And so, when we have perfumed him with myrrh and set a garland of sunflowers upon his head, we will send him away. For we mean to have among us only those purer and

sterner artists who shall help us to be strong and virtuous, and bring health to our souls.

Now this is the lowest view of ethics. If even from this standpoint we see that their sway is absolute and all-embracing, how much more will this be true when we regard moral laws as eternal verities written on the heavens and in the heart of man, or as the revelations of the Divine nature and will? For one who has heard the call of Duty as the

“Stern daughter of the voice of God,”

there is no escape thereafter into a region whither that voice cannot follow him. Forevermore it summons him to choose between good and evil in all that he does. He must be obedient or rebellious. There is no middle course. Heavy and grievous necessity of choice! Oftentimes does it destroy our placid, untroubled enjoyment, or check us in careless pursuit of pleasure: but in so far does it lift us above the level of the beasts that take

“Their license in the fields of time.”

Does it seem to us a great burden? Well may we remember, then, that every crown is a burden; and this is the painful, ennobling birthright of humanity, to know and share the sovereignty of ethics.

If this be true the artist must submit. He must acknowledge the jurisdiction of morality over himself as man, and over his work as part of human life. And even if he basely and ignorantly denies this the world will not and can not admit the denial. He may cry never so loudly, “You must not ask whether this is moral or immoral, but only whether it is well made or ill made;” the moral sense of mankind will still pass judgment on him and his work. His protest is but a vain revolt. For surely we have the right to say that a poem is pure and noble, just as well as to say that it is graceful and melodious. We have the right to condemn a false sentiment, just as well as a false quantity. Conformity to the laws of beauty can never absolve that supreme allegiance to the laws of right conduct which binds every man in all his actions.

The second question touches the right of art to exist within

the sovereign domain of ethics. Moralists have been found to condemn art altogether, and declare it so evil in its nature and influence that it should not be suffered to live. This condemnation is sometimes based upon the ground that art is fiction, and therefore in itself wrong. Plutarch tells us that when Thespis came to Athens, Solon reproved him, and asked if he were not ashamed to utter so many falsehoods before the people. And I have heard of an old Scotch-woman who refused to read a novel because it was "just a pack o' lees." But this is stupid, because it confounds fiction with falsehood. The same fallacy would condemn the parables of Christ. It is well exposed by the remark of Dr. Samuel Johnson: "Poets profess fiction; but the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth."

Another objection urged against the fine arts is that their immediate end is pleasure. But why is not pleasure a lawful object of pursuit? Granted that when it is selfish, or cruel, or unbridled, it is wrong. May it not also be kind and generous and reverent? Is there not a rightful delight in the works of God, a just and beneficent exultation in the exercise of our natural faculties and emotions? Surely a man made in the divine image may pursue such pleasure as this lawfully and nobly; and when he attains it he reaches the chief end of his being, for he shows forth most fully the divine glory. Enjoyment of life, in the free and harmonious use of all God-given powers, subject to God-given laws,—this, it seems to me, is the ideal morality.

But it has been said by some moralists that the influence of art is necessarily evil because it excites the feelings without leading to action. It is a sort of emotional dissipation which makes men at once morbidly sensitive and practically inert, and thus unfits them for a self-controlled discharge of the duties of real life. It was for this reason that Plato, inconsistent with himself, proposed to shut out the poets from his Republic. Against this objection we may quote the authority of Milton and Aristotle, who hold that the right exercise of the emotions, which is afforded, for instance, by tragedy, is a discipline of the soul, purging it of excessive passions of fear and hate, making it strong, temperate, and just. It is true, of course, that too great

indulgence in the pleasures of art, especially if it be morbid, hysterical, or violent, weakens the will and finally degrades the character. But here the blame rests not on art itself, but on the temper of self-indulgence and excess in which it is pursued. The best things in the world may be most easily and fatally abused. The good creatures, bread and wine, have been made to minister to gluttony and drunkenness. Religion, like opium, has been used as a narcotic. Because there are some artists who labor chiefly to supply stimulants to the jaded passions of the indolent and luxurious, because there are some men and women who take refuge from the real cares and duties of life in the golden dreams of poetry, painting, and music, like pleasure-lovers in a plague-smitten city shutting themselves in their flowery gardens, shall we therefore say that gardens are evil, that all art is selfish and wrong? No, let us rather say (and remember) that it has often been perverted by the baseness of man to an ignoble end. For the true end of art is not pleasure alone or for its own sake, but pleasure which is noble and helpful. As De Quincey says: "The final object of the fine arts, as truly as that of Science, and much more directly, is the exaltation of our human nature."

If this be denied we have no longer any defence of art. It is immoral; just as truly as the commerce whose final end is wealth, and the civilization whose chief purpose is luxury, are immoral; just as truly as all things selfish and useless, all things which do not tend to make the world purer, happier, better, are immoral. These two questions which we have been considering are at bottom one. They cannot be divided. The relations of art and ethics are vital. The very right of art to exist depends upon its allegiance to morality.

And yet art is not morality.

Just here, it seems to me, a great mistake is often made. Because we assert the relation of art to ethics it is supposed that we mean to teach their identity. The artist very justly, tho somewhat too vigorously, proclaims that he is not a moralist, and demands that we shall recognize the difference between the Golden Rule and a statue of Charity. And certainly, unless we are blind, we must see this. For the rule is simply stated and applied, and that is the whole of it. But the statue is made in

accordance with the laws of beautiful and expressive form. It is not enough that the sculptor should honestly believe that Charity is a virtue. He must know how to bestow upon her a sweet and attractive regard, a lovely and gracious aspect. He must appeal to the imagination. He must delight the sense of beauty. If he can not do this he is no artist, and would be far better employed as a district visitor for a charitable society than in spoiling good bronze or marble. As a man he is bound by the laws of right thought and virtuous conduct: but as an artist he is bound also by the laws of sincere, graceful, and harmonious expression. This it is that distinguishes him from other men, gives him a separate and glorious sphere of work. And from this stand-point we must look at him when we consider the ethical quality and influence of his art.

There are three points at which we can apply a moral standard:

- I. The character of the artist.
- II. The underlying purpose of his art.
- III. The influence of his work.

I. The artist himself ought to be a good man. And by this I mean not so much negative as positive goodness, the goodness which consists, not in doing nothing wrong, but in doing many things right. He ought to be generous, honest, fearless, a man of vigorous and humane virtue, governed by a natural sense of justice, which will teach him to value men and things at their true worth, and filled with a natural sense of mercy, which will make him pitiful and kind and tender. Do you say that this is what every man ought to be? Yes, but especially the artist, not merely for his own sake, but also for the sake of his works. Pure water can flow only from a pure fountain. I know there are some men who deny this. There is an old fable to this effect in the *Gesta Romanorum*. An immoral priest being reproved for his evil life takes his rebuker to a clear stream and bids him drink, then leads him up to the well-spring which flows from the loathsome jaws of a dead dog. I have always despised this story. It is a lie told to prove a lie. If the carrion had been there the water must have been polluted, like a brook of which

I read not long ago, into which the carcass of a sheep had fallen, and tainted the stream so that the little children who drank of it were poisoned. It is folly to think that an evil tree can bring forth good fruit. "You can have noble art," says Ruskin, "only from noble persons, associated under laws fitted to their times and circumstances."

We do not say that this nobility must be perfect and flawless. That would be desirable, but, with human nature as it is, impossible. The very virtues in excess become vices; and artists are exposed to the peculiar dangers and temptations of an overstrained life and sensitive temperament. We know that some of the greatest have had grave defects and faults. But these have not been the sources of their fine and enduring work. They have done well because, in some way or other, they have kept these things out of the inmost sanctuary of their lives; the fountain-head has been pure.

But let evil get possession of a man, so that it controls him, not as an enemy making an occasional inroad, holding some outlying posts, but as a regnant power swaying his heart and life, and he can never be a truly great artist. Just so far as the evil that is in him touches his work it becomes base. Thus the savage moroseness of Salvator made his pictures gloomy and horrible. Perugino's infidelity, his low spirit of material greed, destroyed at last the power of his painting so that he could only cover his canvases with wearisome "Sacred Conversations," in which the saints were idiots and had nothing to say to each other. Byron's unbridled and rebellious pride, which made him revolt against all authority and restraint, barred him, with all his natural gifts, from the first rank of poets; belittled, debased, paralyzed his genius; led him at last to waste his powers in the composition of such a work as "Don Juan," of which we may say that it is a mass of sensual and bitter doggerel, lit up by flashes of wit and rare gleams of poetry, the melancholy monument of a noble mind toiling in slavery to base passions. The fame which it once borrowed from the striking personality of its author has faded away, and it is now read chiefly by the ghouls of literature who nightly feed upon the corruptions which they exhume from books dead and buried. When we compare this pitiable fulfilment with Byron's early power and

promise, who can doubt that one of England's greatest poets was spoiled by an evil temper and a licentious life?

The artist must recognize not only the laws of nature which he is to unfold, and the laws of the art which he follows, but also the laws of ethics by which his personal power is conditioned. He must learn that self-restraint is the highest strength, and that he only can express himself truly and nobly who is master of himself.

“Vergebens werden ungebundene Geister
Nach der Vollendung reiner Höhe streben;
Wer Grosses will, muss sich zusammen raffen:
In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,
Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.”

Emerson has well said: “The moral is the measure of health, and in the voice of genius I hear invariably the moral tone even when it is disowned in words,—health, melody, and a wider horizon belong to moral sensibility.” Name the supreme artists of the world—Homer, Æschylus, Dante, Shakspeare, Milton, Pheidias, Giotto, Michael Angelo, Raphael—and we recognize at once the broad and vigorous morality of the men. They were not, perhaps, free from all faults and vices; but the invariable condition of their power was a profound moral sanity. Without this there cannot be a great artist, because there cannot be a truly great man.

II. The artist should have a moral purpose in his work. But this is something very different from a didactic purpose. For altho the artist is in one sense a teacher, he is first of all a maker, and his teaching is like that of Nature, indirect. If he attempts to use his art merely as a pleasant vehicle of instruction he will fail. The difference between a diagram and a picture is essential, not to be overlooked. I shall not soon forget, even tho Christian charity makes me forgive, the weary time spent with the gigantic cartoons of Peter Cornelius in the top-room of the Berlin National Gallery. I could not help thinking how much better he could have said all that in good plain prose. Didacticism in art is false and impotent. Wordsworth's “Excursion,” in spite of all the efforts of his admirers to beguile the public into reading it through, in spite of the grand passages which

shine star-like from the general obscurity, remains a magnificent failure. His "Ecclesiastical Sonnets" taken altogether are worse yet; and the once-popular "Proverbial Philosophy" of Mr. Tupper exhibits the flat imbecility of didactic art.

I must confess to a certain feeling of remorse for having allowed myself to put any work of Wordsworth in the same sentence with that of Mr. Tupper; for I regard the one as among England's greatest poets, and the other as no poet at all. But after all there is a certain reason in it, for the works thus irreverently named in the same breath have something in common. The same theory of poetry which made a great man write sonnets on "Latitudinarianism" and "The Commination Service," made a very small man afflict the public with the folly of his versified morality.

The first end of art is to delight man through his imagination. When it fails to do this it forfeits its claim to exist. But this delight must be of such a kind that we shall not be the worse for it; it must console us in the sorrows and strengthen us in the conflicts of life with pure and lofty thoughts. It must in its highest moments bring us nearer to God and to humanity. In giving this delight the true artist works naturally, spontaneously, almost unconsciously. He is the lover of fair forms and colors and sweet sounds, helping us to love and to enjoy them. But he is also the lover of virtue, and the underlying purpose of his work is right and beneficent.

Take for instance the art of landscape painting. The artist sees, as I cannot see, the beauty of this world which God has made for man to dwell in. He has a keener, deeper insight of the relations of line and color; he has the skilful hand which can fix the vision of grandeur or beauty upon the canvas so that I also can see it and rejoice in it. He shows me the solemn loneliness of the desert, the glory of sunsets glowing and paling over the pathless sea, the shifting splendors of the great palaces of ice cast forth as morsels on the Northern deep. He leads me through the rich groves of the tropics, and down the sombre aisles of old pine-forests. I behold with him the snow-clad peaks whereon

"God makes himself an awful rose of dawn,"

and the soft valleys fed by streams from those pure slopes. He gives me sight of the dark hills of Scotland clad in their royal purple, and the storm-scarred cliffs fronting with resolute face all the on-setting waves of ocean. He reveals to me the deep wonders of Western river-cañons, and the wild beauty of lonely, mountain-guarded lakes. He makes me feel the quiet charm of

"Wet, bird-haunted English lawns,"

and the peaceful loveliness of our New England valleys, shaded by feathery elms, watered by quiet streams, the fair homes of peace and settled order. The purpose of the artist, the end for which he has labored patiently and skilfully, is just to make me see these things and find joy in them. But is not this a good end, a moral purpose? Does he not help me, bless me, uplift me by his art? Surely he has put a new meaning for me into that glad and reverent word of the Psalmist: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works; in wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches."

And if I shall learn by this to love the creatures of God more deeply, and better to understand their purpose, is not this a good thing for me? It will make me distrust the selfish, reckless civilization which mars the beauty of nature, destroys the forest and blackens the hill-side and pollutes the clear-flowing stream, for the sake of avarice and luxury. It will make me feel that the best and fairest things are those which have been provided most freely for all men to behold and enjoy; and if there be in me that spirit of humility which alone can enable me to take this lesson aright, so shall

"All my heart
Be softened, and made worthy to indulge
Love, and the thoughts that yearn for humankind."

But it is not alone, nor indeed chiefly, in this work of depicting and interpreting nature that the object of the true artist is moral. For doubtless when he comes to represent nobly the life and character of man, his moral purpose will be clearer and stronger, his moral influence more direct. Yet even here it must be largely unconscious.

If he is painting a historical picture he strives to make the

scene, the characters, vivid and impressive. If he is writing a drama he intends to make us see the actors and feel their passions, so that they shall become real and living to us, as Hamlet and Ophelia, Lear and Cordelia, Othello, Iago and Desdemona are real and living, the lasting objects of our love and our wonder, our pity and our scorn. To kindle these emotions, to make them burn with clear intense flame, to fill the soul with the deep fire of thought and feeling, which shall consume the bonds of time and sense, and free us to the loftiest exercise of spiritual powers,—this is the end for which he labors. This is the rapture of his own strong spirit as he discerns with unsealed vision the mysteries of man's life and destiny; and this he will give to us in breathing forms and burning words. But in all this he must not, he dare not, forget or cast away that noblest power which makes him man,—the moral sense. He must see the evil as evil, and the good as good. To be incapable of this were far worse than to be color-blind or rhythm-deaf. This must rule and guide his work.

He will not analyze and expound the moral duties. But he will show us, in the divine light of genius, the fair virtues and the hideous vices, the mighty strife of Ormuzd and Ahriman, in which good and evil, truth and falsehood, light and darkness are evermore contending for the soul of man. The great tide of conflict sweeps to and fro across the field of human life. There are splendid victories and shameful defeats, storm-clouds darkening the face of heaven, floods of light rolling back the gloom, single combats of elected champions, conquests of brute force, and within them more glorious counter-triumphs of heaven-defended innocence. Hate slays and destroys; lust burns and blasts; love restores and heals, shining as the light and distilling as the dew. But as the poet beholds all this and reveals it to us, shall he forget the eternal issues of the conflict? Shall he confuse or disguise the combatants so that we shall mistake them, not knowing friend from foe, but seeing only shifting forms and changing colors? Shall he ignore the moral meaning of the strife? Nay, for then it becomes nothing more than a struggle of beasts, and we sit as cruel and careless spectators in the amphitheatre, or mingle with our fellow-brutes in the fierce confusion of the arena. All the shame of the defeat, all the

glory of the victory, all the blessedness of the peace, lie in the right or wrong of it. This the poet must feel and make us feel, unless he would degrade himself and us. If his sympathy, his purpose, be not moral, it is base, unworthy. He cannot speak of these things indifferently. He cannot be content with rousing our emotions, careless of the objects towards which they flow. He purposes to make us rejoice and mourn, admire and love and hate ; but in all this he will have us humane and just, feeling our own true part in this mortal warfare : a noble joy, a noble grief, a noble love, and a noble scorn,—by these emotions he will help us to a noble life.

III. Clearly the moral influence of art depends on the moral character and purpose of the artist. But of these we cannot always judge fairly and fully, because they are hidden from us by the veil of distance or the obscurities of human life. The personality and the motive of the workman are often remote, undiscoverable, save as they are actually revealed to us by his works ; and therefore we must judge these as they are, discerning by moral sense the spirit that breathes from them, and reckoning them as base or noble by the influence which they are fitted to exercise upon the world.

Not by the influence which they actually exercise upon certain individuals. For he who has no music in his soul is deaf to the sweetest strains of heaven-born harmony ; and he whose heart is evil will set foul words to the melodies of angels. To the vile all things are vile. This is his curse, the vengeful fate which pursues him because he has sold his heart to sin. For him the whole world, is polluted. Wealth awakens his avarice ; power is to him the minister of selfish ambition and cruelty ; beauty in art or nature only stirs his bestial lust. The glow of rich colors, the imperishable symmetry of pure marbles, the soft cadences of music, the beauty of the human face divine, all that is fairest in the world, is but the stimulant for his foul passions. He reads the noblest poems only to distil poison from them ; with greedy, bestial eyes he scans the purest statues and pictures ; he cons the Bible in secret only to find food for an unhallowed fancy. Shall we therefore destroy the works of Shakspeare and shatter the Venus of Melos and hide the Bible in cloistered

gloom? Even then we shall not help this thrice-cursed man; for the fountain of evil is within his soul: among the very angels of heaven he will feed his heart with the thoughts of hell.

Nor can we hope to save this man, and such as he, by any moral ministry of art, however pure and strong. Poems and pictures will not deliver him from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Art cannot create morality any more than worship can create religion. There must be first a quickening, an awakening, a new birth in the inner nature of the man, so that he shall know the good, desire it, seek it; and then begins the helpful, cheering, ennobling influence of noble art.

Of noble art, I say; for here is the test by which we must distinguish between high and low, good and evil, in works of art. Does it help or hinder us in the attainment of a pure and lofty character? Does it lift us upward or allure us downward? Does it make us love God better by showing us the beauty of what He has made, and love our fellow-men better by revealing the splendid virtues of which heroes are capable, the grace and humor of the most humble life? Or does it appeal to our baser passions, our selfish pride and avarice, our cruel anger, our unbridled appetite? Here is a standard no less real, and far higher, than the canons of taste, the laws of symmetry and beauty. I do not deny that these are true and necessary. There is a world of difference between fine work and poor work,—between Milton's "Paradise Lost" and Pollok's "Course of Time," Raphael's Madonnas and Carlo Dolci's simpering inanities, Michael Angelo's Night and Morning and Rogers' statuettes. No morality can obliterate this difference. But on the other hand, no art can obliterate the difference between things good and evil; and this goes deeper, infinitely deeper, for it divides eternal life from eternal death.

We shall not always find it easy to apply this moral standard to works of art, partly because our own ideal is too dim and confused; partly because the moral influence of many things is vague, delicate, obscure; and partly because in this intricate world evil is so much mixed with good and good with evil. But sometimes we can distinguish clearly and definitely, and often the moral quality is hidden only because we are wilfully blind to it.

Take for instance the art of sculpture. Is it possible that any sane man does not feel the difference between such works as the Apollo Belvidere, the Ludovisi Juno, the Venus of Melos, and the lascivious nakednesses in marble and bronze and tinted porcelain which have come from the workshops of Paris to decorate our homes? Shall we accept them all with equal complaisance as works of art?

Or take the poems which have the passion of love for their theme. Is there not a great gulf forever fixed between Swinburne's "*Laus Veneris*" and Tennyson's "*Maud*"? Are they not animated by different spirits, breathing forth effluences as distinct as the heavy, perfume-poisoned air of the seraglio, and the pure breeze of summer blowing over banks of flowers?

In every field of art this difference holds: we find the works of darkness and the works of light. The painter who seeks his themes among the scenes of war, may appeal to our morbid love of horrors, teaching us to take a strange delight in streams of blood and bursting shells, death-agonies and piles of corpses under the lurid light of battle; or he may exalt mere military glory, the pomp and circumstance of war. Then we shall have pictures like those infernal scenes of battle-pride and blood-thirst which decorate the walls of Versailles, or those which since 1870 have made so many German galleries hateful. But if the painter seeks to show the glory of self-sacrifice, courage, endurance, to make us feel and pity the sufferings of men in a good cause, then even war may furnish some noble pictures, such as Miss Thompson's "*Roll-Call in the Crimea*."

So, also, in the painting of common life there are two spirits. The one you may discern in the canvases of Teniers and Brueghel; brutal boors, carousing, revelling, fighting, teaching us to despise and hate. The other breathes from such pictures as that priceless interior of Peter de Hooghe's in the Berlin Museum, or Millet's solemn "*Angelus*." The sanctity and peaceful joy of home, the mysterious depth and value of every life of man, the dignity of labor, the beauty of pure humanity,—these the artist makes us feel and reverence as "over the lowest provinces of man's existence he pours the glory of his own soul, and they rise, in shadow and sunshine, softened and brightened, into a beauty which other eyes discern not in the highest."

The imagination is the medium through which this moral influence of art is exerted. And to a man rightly grounded in ethics it is of greatest value. It quickens, informs, enlightens the moral sense; reveals the inner soul of men and things; embodies evil that we may hate it, and good that we may love it; discloses the far-reaching flow of human deeds and the deep meaning of all man's thoughts and actions: thus it lifts us from the realm of mechanical and unwilling obedience into a higher region where morality is glad, spontaneous, vital. This is the sphere into which religion leads us as the living children of God. "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil." Not a mere sense of duty, but a discerning vision of the imperishable beauty of the good, a deep delight in adoring service; not a mere force-pumped current of thought and action flowing within the walls of law, but a living, springing fountain of love,—this is the highest, best form of spiritual life. And we welcome all that helps us upward into this pure region, all woven harmonies and sweet cadences of music and of words, all fair colors and breathing forms, all worthy monuments of heroes and magnificent temples of worship, all works of human skill and genius which teach us to hate the base and love the noble. For this is the golden dream of the highest art.

"Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light
And joy its own security.
And they a blissful course may hold
E'en now, who, not unwisely bold,
Live in the spirit of this creed,
Yet find that other strength according to their need."

There still remains the practical question of the actual influence of art in the world: has it been good or evil? Remains and will remain; for who can answer it finally and with authority? Who can trace the subtle tendencies of the different forms and schools of art in their historical development, detect the spirit which has animated and controlled them, measure their legitimate effects apart from all other influences which have mingled with them, strike the exact balance of harm and blessing, and pronounce a verdict for or against? Our field of

vision is limited ; our powers of analysis are defective. We can only look at certain periods of history, at certain parts of the life of humanity, and beholding art as an active and necessary element of that life, we can say, here it has been a curse because it has been indifferent or hostile to ethics, and there it has been a blessing because pervaded by moral sentiment and guided by moral law. If we attempt to make a general estimate, it will depend largely upon our point of view, but chiefly upon the spirit and temper of our minds, the kind of faith that is in us. If we are pessimists, believing more strongly in the devil than in God, we will think the world is growing worse and art is helping to destroy it. If we are optimists, believing more strongly in God than in the devil, we will think the world is growing better and art is helping to uplift and bless it. And whichever side we take, we shall find no lack of illustrations and arguments.

But apart from this natural distinction between the critics of hope and the critics of despair, it seems to me that there is another circumstance which has given to many modern estimates of the moral influence of art a dark and sombre cast. I mean the fact that the period of artistic development best known to us, most generally studied and widely admired, is the Italian Renaissance, a period which produced at once the most beautiful paintings and the most corrupt men the world has ever seen. It is his knowledge of this period that has colored the writings of Ruskin with such gloomy hues, made him write those magnificent Jeremiads of art, made him liken the names of great painters to the passing bells of national glory, and declare that "at the moment when in any kingdom you point to the triumphs of the greatest artists you point also to the determined hour of the nation's decline."

Was it then art that destroyed Italy, filled her with horrible corruption, debased and degraded her, in the age of the Renaissance? Or was it rather something else that destroyed first Italy and then Italian art? A false and worldly church, a religion enslaved and polluted by the traditions of men, a selfish political system which threw unlimited power into the hands of soldier-nobles and merchant-princes,—these were the influences which wrought the downfall of Italy; and with her fell her art.

That bright promise of a glorious day which had dawned in Cimabue was extinguished. No longer, as in the times of Giotto, the Pisani, Angelico, and the early Florentines, working in the spirit of broad humanity and moral power for the welfare and delight of the people, art, under the insidious influence of that corrupt church whose foundation-doctrine was that every man, and even God himself, has his price, bartered her birthright for a mess of pottage, and bent herself in the spirit of mercenary greed to minister selfish and often sensual pleasure to the rich and luxurious classes.

But is Italian painting the only or the highest development of art? I think not. Greek sculpture, Gothic architecture, English poetry, are even higher triumphs of human genius; and these were wrought among strong, noble, and triumphant people. The age of Pheidias was the brightest and purest period of Athenian history. The great cathedrals which rose from the soil of France and Germany and England into the all-over-arching heaven, embodying in their mysterious growth the thoughts and aspirations of hosts of unknown artists, were built by nations whose force, moral and physical, was great and increasing. The golden age of English poetry was the age of England's power and glory under the vigorous sway of the Virgin Queen.

But, mark you, the temper and purpose of these arts was clearly moral. The Greek sculptor carved in ivory and gold the statue of the bright-eyed Pallas, goddess of heavenly wisdom, whose teaching is

"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,—
These three alone lead life to sovereign power."

And this he set, not in the palace of some rich patron, but high on the Acropolis, where it should speak of truth and temperance to all the people. The many architects and workmen of the great churches and cathedrals were builders for God and man, repeating with wondering love the lines and forms of nature in their work, rearing temples of worship not for the select elect, but where the rich and the poor might bow together before the Lord, the Maker of them all. The poets whose lofty

verse is the proudest monument of England's glory wrote in the love of goodness and the hatred of evil, wrote so that their art has been a fountain of life and health to the race.

Here, I think, as inheritors of the splendid legacy of English poetry, we can speak without doubt or hesitation. When we talk of the moral influence of sculpture or painting or music upon other races in other ages, there must be something of guess-work, there may be something of exaggeration, in what we say. But the influence of our own art (the highest and purest) upon our own race is beyond all question. Trace the history of English poetry from its beginnings down to the present time, and you shall see that it has always been pervaded with moral purpose and instinct with moral power. It has exposed the corruptions and helped to overthrow the dominion of a false priesthood. It has been the foe of tyrants and the herald of liberty. It has revealed the imperishable beauty of nature and the dignity of simple manhood. It has deepened the love of home and country and humanity. It has kindled lofty emotions and embodied high ideals. It has lifted the race to a nobler level of moral life. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspeare, Milton, Pope, Cowper, Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson,—these have been the most potent teachers, the greatest benefactors of England and her children. And if there is to-day anything fine and strong, any distinctive quality of moral purity and power in the character of the English race, it is largely due to the mighty and blessed influence of English poetry.

By the honorable glory of that poetry we protest against the false and degrading doctrine that art has no concern with the moral life. We refuse to welcome these new poets who come to us

“With poisonous honey stol'n from France,”

caring not for false or true, caring not for base or noble, worshipping only that beauty which is outward and sensuous, and singing in melodious verse the Cyprian Aphrodite. We will not have their shrill falsetto in the choir of England's true singers. We will not turn away at their call from the

“God-gifted organ-voice of England,”

or forsake for them the pure, sweet notes of him who wears the laurel from the brows

“Of him that uttered nothing base.”

We will demand, not from our poets only, but from all our artists, work which shall cheer and bless and strengthen us, an art which shall help us to live more happily and nobly, the beautiful embodiment of that word proceeding from the Spirit of all truth and beauty.

Whatsoever things are pure and lovely and of good report, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things.

HENRY J. VAN DYKE, JR.