

ART AND SCHOLASTICISM

THE two words Art and Scholasticism, set down thus side by side, look at first sight somewhat oddly paired. A little book with this title,* which is useful out of all proportion to its size, shows that Scholastic philosophy offers a very sound and far-reaching theory of art, and for anyone interested in such questions will well repay careful reading. And who is not so interested? Who but has thought and talked more or less vaguely, and perhaps all the more ardently, about Art for Art's sake, about the antagonism of Art and Morality, or the identification of Art with Morality, or the dissociation of Art from Morality? At least, after assimilating this statement of the scholastic notion of Art, vagueness will be out of the question; and when arguments arise they will spring from the very root of the matter, from first principles and metaphysical presuppositions.

Chapters I to V give a detailed analysis of ideas and words; the rest of the book is a series of deductions from and a synthesis of the clear notions so obtained. If we may for a moment compare artistic production to some marvellous machine, the parts are taken asunder before our eyes and cleaned of dust and cobwebs; when they are put together again we have the joy of understanding their functions and following their interplay.

When the Scholastics speak of Art, the term is exact and wide, ranging from the art of the shipbuilder to that of the logician. We moderns habitually use it of the *fine arts* exclusively, of the arts in which the notion of Beauty predominates. The Scholastics treat of Beauty separately in their *Metaphysics*. This fact alone is significant for us heirs "of the measureless

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intellectual disorder of the nineteenth century." It indicates the lack of clearness in theories which "considering in art the fine arts alone, and treating of beauty only in connection with art, run the risk of vitiating at once the theory of Art and of the Beautiful."

We have next to distinguish between the speculative and the practical order. Our intelligence has faculties of which the nature and end is pure knowledge ; e.g. Science is the knowledge of things in a demonstrative way ; Wisdom is the knowledge of the first causes of things. But in the practical order the aim is to do something with the knowledge, and the faculty of doing or making things is Art.

The majority of men do not—cannot—rest in the speculative order, in the enjoyment of their knowledge. Their intelligence works in the practical order in doing and making. The distinction between doing and making is most helpful in clearing up our notions. It is the distinction between the act viewed in its own nature, and in the thing produced. The act, the applying our intelligence to some practical purpose, viewed in its own nature depends on our free-will and instinctively seeks our own good. If it conforms to the law of our human nature and our true end, it will be good in itself. It touches the perfection of our human nature as such. Its sphere is the sphere of morality, and the faculty which reigns supreme in this sphere is Prudence. "Queen of the moral faculties, noble and made to command, because it measures our acts in relation to an ultimate end which is God Himself supremely loved, it has nevertheless a suggestion of wretchedness about it because its domain is the multitude of needs and circumstances and occupations amidst which humanity labours, and because it impregnates with humanity everything that it touches."

Making, the act viewed in relation to the thing produced, will be good if the thing adequately represents

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and fulfils its own particular purpose. This is the sphere of Art, and *in that sphere* only one law reigns, the requirement or good of the thing to be made. Still, the thing to be made is the *matter* of art; its *form* is from the thought that conceives, prepares, outlines, broods over, and ripens the matter. Here we have again two aspects of the work of artisan or artist, of the work of art. We have the thing in itself with its own nature and law;—and hence “the tyrannical and absorbing power of Art and its astonishing power of pacification”; and on the other hand the fact that the work of artisan or artist must bear the stamp of the intelligence that produced it. From which it seems to follow that the work of art will be wholly good if it is fully in accord with its own law and purpose, and bears the stamp of a human intelligence working in accordance with *its* law and purpose.

Science is intelligence properly applied in speculative matters. Art is intelligence applied to the thing to be made. Prudence is intelligence properly applied to the use of our powers. Or again, “the Savant is an Intellectual who demonstrates, the Artist an Intellectual who produces, the Prudent an intelligent Will-power acting well.” This is all insisted on to bring out the intellectual nature of art, and its amorality when looked at in itself. Its action “consists in imprinting an idea in matter,” but its very essence is clearly to conceive and estimate the idea to be expressed. The more perfectly the matter is adapted to the purpose, the higher the work of art; the highest degree would be reached if the thing were so made as in turn to use its own activity—the art of God.

The artist may of course fail to realize his conception, through defective tools or lack of technique. Or he may deviate wilfully from the natural purpose, producing freaks and grotesque results. Or he may abstain, through prudence as defined, from expressing

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his idea in matter : " He will . . . need a certain heroism to keep always in the line of right doing, and not to sacrifice his immortal substance to the devouring idol in his soul." Or he may take account of contingent and modifying circumstances, and in the fine arts these may be very subtle.

" Such in its main features is the idea that the Scholastics formed of Art. Not only in Phidias and Praxiteles, but in the carpenter and smith of our villages they recognized an intrinsic development of the reason, nobility of the intelligence. . . . The doctors of the Middle Ages did not, like many of our introspective psychologists, confine their observation to the man of towns, libraries, or academies ; they had a care for wide, common humanity. But in so doing they were still studying their Master. Considering the art or activity proper to the *artifex*, they were considering the activity that the Lord exercised by choice during His whole hidden life ; they were considering also in a certain way the very activity of the Father ; for they knew that the faculty of Art in its absolute sense is predicated of God, like Goodness and Justice. . . ."

The next step is to define Beauty. The definition of St. Thomas is *id quod visum placet*. *Visum*, that is a vision, an intuitive perception ; *quod placet*, followed by joy ; joy in the perception, therefore an intellectual joy ; not the joy peculiar to the act of perceiving merely, but " a joy which superabounds and overflows the act on account of the object perceived." Besides, the senses have a share in it in as far as they subserve the intellectual perception. Further, this perception of the intellect through the senses is immediate and intuitive.

Beauty is, however, not merely an impression ; it is in the thing itself, one of the aspects of reality. It depends on three conditions : integrity, that is com-

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pleteness, wholeness, finish ; proportion, of parts one to another and to the whole ; and the shining-out of an intelligible principle, *splendor formæ*. This *form*—no other word serves the purpose here like the technical word—is “the principle which gives its characteristic perfection to everything that is,” and is “a ray of the creative Intelligence imprinted in the heart of the created being.” It is, for example, “the sensible brilliancy of colour or sound, the intelligible clearness of an arabesque, or of an equilibrium, of activity or movement ; it is a human thought or a divine thought reflected in things, it is above all the flashing out from deep within of the soul, of the soul as principle of life and animal strength, or of spiritual life, grief and passion. There is a shining-out of a higher order, that of grace, which the Greeks did not know.”

The intuition of beauty differs essentially from the abstract perception of truth. “The intelligence . . . making no effort at abstraction, enjoys without laborious or discursive reflection.” Beauty as we have seen supposes some sensible delight, of the eye or the ear or the imagination ; but the higher our level of culture, the more spiritual will be the *splendor formæ* that we are able to appreciate.

All three conditions of beauty are relative to the thing of which beauty is an aspect. They are conditioned by it, and therefore there are always an infinity of ways in which work may be beautiful. But the beauty is “an irradiation emanating from the First Brightness” and therefore suggests its source and “tends of itself to lift the soul beyond the created.”

We can now unite the concepts of art and beauty. The law of the work of art in general was that it should be made adequate to its idea, function, utility to man. The law of the work of fine art—what we moderns simply call the “work of art”—is that it should be perfectly expressive of its characteristic beauty. While

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the "work of art" once properly conceived is an end and law to itself, an element in this proper conception is the spiritual nature of beauty and its tendency to uplift the soul. "The fine arts stand out in the *genus* art as man stands out in the *genus* animal. And like man himself they resemble a horizon line at which matter and spirit touch. They have a spiritual soul." . . . "Hence for the artist a strange and pathetic situation, an image of the situation of man in the world, where he has to wear himself out among bodies and to live with spirits." It is this spiritual soul of art that explains certain analogies and affinities between the artist and the contemplative.

The conception of the work of art is not the mere choice of a subject, nor an abstract idea to be exposed and advocated, nor yet a detailed plan of the work. It is the vision, by the intelligence, imagination, and sensibility of the artist, of the expected resultant work of art. The rules of art are dictated by the result aimed at. Some rules, of course, are general, prescribed by the nature of our mental operations; but these do not avail to produce a work of art unless they are vitally realized by the appropriate activity of the intelligence, by a superior gift fertilized by culture and discipline. When they are so realized, it is as absurd to talk of an artist being in bondage to rules as to talk of a workman being in bondage to his tools. But those who are best masters of the rules of an art are often least able to formulate them; and the rules are often subtle and exceedingly personal. "However, on account of the large element of rational and discursive effort in art, the tradition of discipline, education by masters, continuity in time of human collaboration, in a word the *via disciplinæ*, is absolutely necessary; both for technique properly so-called and material means . . . and for the conceptual and rational equipment needed and purveyed by certain arts (notably

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the fine arts and classical art above all) ; and, lastly, for the indispensable maintenance of a sufficiently high level of culture among the average of artists and artisans. . . .”

There is “ a sort of conflict between the transcendence of beauty and the material narrowness of the work to be produced. . . . The artist has before him an immense and desert sea . . . and the mirror he holds up to it is no bigger than his heart. The genius, the creator in art, is he who finds . . . a new way in which the brilliancy of the *form* may shine in the *matter*.” Consequently the rules of his art may be new and disconcerting and highly individual. “ Seeing that it is a certain individual and original realization of beauty, the work that the artist is going to produce is for him an end in itself : not the end in general of his art, but the particular end which governs his present operation and by which all the means must be regulated. . . . Now . . . each one judges of his particular purposes according to what he is himself at the moment. . . . Unless all the artist’s powers of desire and emotion are fundamentally rectified and uplifted in relation to the beautiful, which is superhumanly transcendent and immaterial, then human life and the humdrum round of the senses and the routine of art itself will degrade his conception.”

The notion of art can only be kept pure by insisting on its intellectual element. Art does not consist in producing a delirious joy and over-exciting or destroying the balance of the soul. It does not consist in producing sensible pleasure or awakening emotion : sensible pleasure and emotion are effects but not the purpose of art. It does not consist in technical skill, in which the moderns often excel, for technical skill is a means to art, not its end. It does not consist in the illusion produced ; such illusion, if perfect, would be a delusion pure and simple. It does not consist in

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the direct imitation or exact reproduction of nature : “ It is clear that if art were a means of knowledge it would be strangely inferior to geometry.” Art works, indeed, in materials afforded by nature, but as is admirably set forth in a quotation from Goethe, the artist is at once master and slave of nature. “ He is its slave, in this sense, that he has to work with terrestrial means to be understood ; he is its master in this sense, that he subjects and subordinates these terrestrial means to his high intentions.” These pages on “ imitation ” are rich in matter for thought. *Id quod visum placet* was a definition of beauty—the joy of intuitive perception. The greater and higher the possibilities of perceiving, the more abundant the possibilities of joy. Mere reproduction is but a first step, a means. Art aiming at beauty does not stop simply at form or colour or sound, but makes them signs of something else. And the thing signified may again be a sign ; and the richer the suggestion, provided it can be grasped spontaneously, the richer the joy and the beauty. “ The imitative arts aim neither at copying the appearances of nature, nor at representing the “ ideal,” but at making a thing of beauty by manifesting a *form* through sensible signs.” This *form* is not conceived out of nothingness. The artist, being a creator only in a secondary and comparative sense, finds it “ in the immense treasury of created things, of sensible nature and the world of souls and the interior of his own soul. From this point of view he is first and foremost a man who sees deeper than others and discovers in the real a spiritual radiance that others cannot discern in it.” The *form* is thus the personal impress of the artist on the work of art. This disposes of the question whether a work of art can also serve a purpose, whether a *thèse*—to borrow the convenient French word—interferes with the purity of art. If the *thèse* is consciously superadded to the work

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of art, "it betrays deliberation, a duality between the intelligence of the artist and his sensibility which are precisely what art requires united." But if the thing to be demonstrated has become part of the vital process in the artist's soul, there is no duality, no injury to his art. The cathedral-builders of old "did not intend to demonstrate the harmonies of Christian dogma nor by some artifice to suggest a *religious emotion*. They believed, and as they were they worked. Their work revealed the truth of God, but without doing it *on purpose*, and because they did not do it on purpose."

The question of religious art is hereby settled ; it will be religious if the artist is religious. "Everything is in that," said Goethe ; "one must *be* something in order to be able to *do* something."

Our difficulty in clear thinking arises from the vague and shifting use of the word Art. We talk as if art lay in self-expression ; or again in inspiration ; or, from quite a different standpoint, in discipline. It partakes of all these things and is none exclusively ; of inspiration and self-expression because the artist must see his work as in a vision ; of discipline because he must make a careful and conscious choice of the means to be employed.

These means are dictated by the end in view. In this sense, and in this only, can we satisfactorily interpret the famous "Art for Art's sake." The means of execution, expression, realization do not dictate or justify the conception ; they are not an end in themselves. The cult of formal perfection, "unrestrained love of form," to quote Baudelaire, "drives to abnormal and unheard-of disorders. Swallowed up by the ferocious passion for the beautiful, the strange, the pretty, the picturesque—for there are degrees—the notions of the appropriate and the true disappear. The frenzied passion for art is a canker devouring the

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rest ; and as the entire absence of the appropriate and the true in art is equivalent to the absence of art, the entire man vanishes. . . .”

Art then sees something to be done, a thing of beauty to be created. The true artist feels that in this sphere he must struggle to be true to his conception ; he must be “perpetually on guard not only against the commonplace attraction of facility and success, but against a multitude of more subtle temptations, and against the least relaxation of his inward effort,” a condition which creates a certain analogy between the artist and the ascetic. But for all that the sphere of art needs to be delimited. The artist is a man, working in material and subjective conditions from which he need, nay, may not escape. And Art, for all the intrinsic nobility of its intellectual quality, is subordinate to Prudence, which judges it in its relation to the human perfection of the artist ; and which judges broadly of the effect of the work of art once it is realized. “The Prudent man, when with his feet firmly planted on his moral virtue, he condemns a work of art, is certain that he is defending against the Artist a sacred good, that of Man, and he looks at the Artist as a child or a madman. The Artist perched on his intellectual *habitus** is sure that he is defending a no less sacred good, that of Beauty, and he seems to crush the Prudent man with the dictum of Aristotle : *Vita quæ est secundum speculationem est melior quam quæ secundum hominem.*”

The solution of the conflict is in Wisdom, attained in the shortest and most direct line by the saints, though it be the ultimate goal of all men. . . . “Wisdom, placed at the point of view of God, which dominates the spheres of Doing and of Making, can alone set Art and Prudence in perfect agreement.”

* A simplified definition of the word *habitus* is given on p. 10 : “a stable disposition perfecting the subject in the line of his nature.”

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From all this it appears that "Christianity does not *facilitate* art. It deprives it of many facile means, it bars its course in many places, but in order to raise its level. While creating these salutary difficulties, it lifts it up from within, reveals to it a hidden beauty more entrancing than light, gives it what the artist has most need of: simplicity, the peace of fear and love, the innocence that makes matter docile and brotherly to men." So that we can accept the limitations, like the rest of the Christian life, willingly and with open eyes. Art takes its place in the scheme of things in which "all our values depend on the nature of our God."

In this, possibly rash, attempt to make an analysis of an analysis, without using technical language, hardly any hint has been given of the illuminating corollaries and *obiter dicta* with which the little treatise teems; or of the wealth of modern and "topical" quotations in the copious notes. Quite the most fascinating feature of the book is the light it throws on many confused and confusing art theories, bringing out their "soul of truth"; and the way in which mind is shown to meet mind across the gulf of seven centuries.

MARY RYAN.



DEATH

FRIENDS no more their weapons wield;
Cruel death their fate hath sealed;
I shall follow from the field
With cloven helm and riven shield,
With tattered mail and broken sword and wounds un-
healed.

From *Bólu-Hjálmar*.

Trans. JOHN GRAY.