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ART IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

I. INTRODUCTION.

Sedulo curavi humanas actiones non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere.........Et mens...vera contemplatione aeque gaudet, ac earum rerum cognitione, quae sensibus gratae sunt.

SPINOZA, *Tract. Pol.* I. 4.

I have studiously endeavoured not to laugh at, not to deplore, nor to despise human actions; but to understand......And the mind... derives the same kind of pleasure from true contemplation as from the perception of those things which please the senses.

IN his opening address yesterday the Vice-Chancellor gave us timely warning that we stand as yet too near to the nineteenth century to talk of it as a whole. He also maintained that the grouping of events did not necessarily coincide with the divisions of time by calendar and clock. Nature and history have not been so obliging to the desires and needs of the human mind, and neither assume, as we are too apt to do, that man and human thought are the centre and pivot of all events and phenomena. The apprehending mind is of course easily led, nay driven, to assume that its own laws which regulate thought immediately control the course of natural

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and historical phenomena; and though the *apprehension* of those phenomena is certainly dependent upon these "laws of thought," most errors in apprehension have resulted from the premature projection and intrusion of such laws into the world of phenomena itself. Still more misleading and distorting in this respect is the artistic instinct of man, which craves for harmony and "composition" in all things; of this I shall have more to say presently. This instinct tyrannises over the mind, and constantly urges it to clip away corners, add a little curve here and there, force facts into "proper" sequence and coincidences—so that they should all become clear, pleasing, or wonderful—until in fact, amorphous, disjointed, or incomplete phenomena present themselves as an orderly and compact whole about which it is easy and safe to predicate and generalise. And thus we insist on having a compact nineteenth century with its birth, rise, climax and gradual decline, decay and death, on the symmetrical analogy of all other regular and "normal" life. This lends itself to artistic composition.

Have you not of recent years felt with me an irritation, an exasperation, almost a "holy" scientific indignation, when you have heard young and old, wise and foolish, thoughtful and brainless people, subtly suggest or blatantly mouth the phrase "decadent" or "*fin de siècle*," with a smile of pregnant, familiar and intimate understanding, at the bottom of which there was a suggestion of a world of unexpressed meaning, perhaps verging on the improper

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and indecent? Well, there was no decadent *fin de siècle*. Far from feeling ourselves to be decadents we ought to feel like children growing up. I have felt myself in these last years, and I feel myself now, an *incipient nascent* in the very midst of a vigorous life surrounded by the germs and the growth of great things in all matters human—so great, important, and epoch-making, that I doubt whether in the whole history of the race a like outburst of energy can be found.

This is enough to suggest to you the difficulty of generalising about the nineteenth century.

My own difficulty, in the special subject with which I wish to deal, has been caused by the wide and peculiar sense which I wish to give to the term Art, a meaning which is not always attached to it here in England. For I give to that term a significance so wide and comprehensive that it runs counter to the ordinary use of the term in the English language—or, rather, in the language of England. For in the United States it is used more correctly.

In England the term Art is generally limited in its application to painting and sculpture, perhaps including architecture; as the term Science is (with the same fatal consequences to correct understanding and to the intellectual and practical life of the nation) narrowed down to designate the natural and exact sciences. This narrow or incorrect use of the term Art has in this country stood in the way of the proper understanding of things artistic, and vitiates our esti-

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mate of the artistic achievement of any country or age. I am therefore grateful to my friend Dr Roberts and to those who helped him in organising this meeting, for enabling me, in the organisation of the course to which this lecture is to serve as an inaugural address, to define the true nature and position of Art and to counteract the misleading definition of its province.

The Germans and the French employ the terms Science and Art more consistently and logically than we do. With them Science means all forms of conscious and systematic apprehension, Art includes all forms of aesthetic enjoyment. The one deals with the life of knowledge, the other with that of the contemplative emotions. Both are *theoretical*, and in so far they are distinguished from the practical, from action as such.

Art arises out of man's natural desire for harmony and proportion, which, I could show to you had I time, is the mainspring of all conscious endeavour of the human mind. In one aspect—a quasi-physiological aspect—it might be called the instinct of mental economy, which makes for the easiest and most rapid (and therefore the most pleasant) form of perception. All conscious endeavour to select[1] or to

[1] I should like to emphasise the word *selection*. For it is not always realised that the artistic function and activity of the mind need not necessarily lead to the elaboration or modification of the "raw material" out of which a work of art is fashioned; but that the selection of such objects as have elements of harmony and evoke artistic moods in man is

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create objects of contemplation which correspond to an outer harmony, and evoke in man an inner harmony of mood, belong to the domain of art.

The works of art which man thus creates may be conveniently subdivided into the arts of space and the arts of time; or, from the point of view of the perceiving mind, those that appeal to the eye (including touch[1]) and those that appeal to the ear. The arts of space are thus concerned with the contiguity and relation in space of objects having themselves intrinsic qualities of density, form, and colour. The material of the arts of time are sounds, the order and quality of their succession and relation, as well as their intrinsic quality of pitch and form. The one has led to painting, sculpture, architecture, and all kinds of decorative art. The other has produced music, poetry, and prose literature.

also essentially an aesthetic act. The selection of beautifully rounded pebbles, symmetrical crystals and shells, is an act of decorative art just as much as the carving of rude stones into symmetrical and decorative shapes. The admiration of a landscape, of cloud-forms, nay, of the animal and human form—the freer it is from feelings of interested use or possession—constitutes an artistic act on the part of the observer: it originates from and appeals to those same artistic instincts which lead to the production of pictures and statues.

[1] I cannot here enter into the question of the relation of the "lower" senses, smell, taste, and touch, to art. In one respect they certainly partake of an aesthetic character. But on the whole they are so intimately and directly mixed up with the physiological subsistence of man as to exclude the disinterested and undesiring attitude of mind which leads to the pure contemplation of art and the production of the aesthetic mood.

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For all practical purposes these distinctions are clear in your minds. The only real difficulty is to be found in the definition of literature as an art, namely, the distinction between the forms of prose literature which belong to art and those which belong to science. For, whereas the designed production of colours, lines and forms by the hand of man, and even of musical tones (not words), hardly ever takes place unless for artistic or quasi-artistic purposes, words are so essentially the means of thought and its communication, that their use for aesthetic purposes must be emphasised by more elaborate insistence upon form in order to bring them within the domain of art. But it will be enough to say here, that all prose literature in which the literary form is not merely the vehicle for imparting the results of scientific enquiry (and thus appeals to the sense of truth), but constitutes the essential feature of the work (and thus appeals to the sense of form and to imagination), belongs to the domain of art.

These being my views (which are here presented in a much condensed, and consequently inadequate form), it will be readily understood how I consider the definition of art which includes only or chiefly painting and sculpture, and does not include music, poetry and fiction, as fundamentally misleading. In making any estimate of the achievement of art in the nineteenth century, we should fail entirely in our endeavour were we, for instance, to exclude music and fiction. They are as direct and adequate expressions

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of the artistic temper and spirit of our age, as architecture or sculpture and painting were for previous ages, arising, as they do, out of the same fundamental function, and satisfying the same needs of the human mind.

It is in this sense, therefore, that I use the term art when dealing with its manifestations in the century which we have just left behind us.

But before we enter into the detailed examination of the artistic achievement itself, there is one other fallacy, widely current in connexion with my subject, which I wish to expose. And I hesitate the less to do this, as in exposing it I shall be paving the way for the correct understanding of the century's achievement in the several departments of art.

The fallacy in question is the proposition: that the nineteenth century was an age of science, and that —or that *therefore*—it was not an age of art; or, in other words, that the remarkable achievements of science have entirely dwarfed those of art.

This hasty generalisation is in great part due to the very artistic instinct upon which I have just been dwelling—or, rather,—to a trespassing of that instinct upon the scientific instinct. For, let me remind you that, though we are to-day dealing with art, we are emphatically doing this in the scientific or critical spirit; and it is our desire to apprehend clearly and soberly the relation between the phenomena of our subject in just that spirit in which the mathematician or the biologist endeavours to be scientific in dealing

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with his data. Now, the misuse of this artistic sense is responsible for a whole group of fallacies. It leads, when truth is concerned, to inaccuracy, to subjectivity of judgment, to the intrusion of the personal equation. As so often "the wish is father to the thought," so the predominance and tyranny of the artistic sense lead us to seek, to find, and often to create, "harmony" in outer phenomena where no such harmony exists. In our description of phenomena and our account of events our desire for symmetry and harmony, for composition, plays us many tricks when we ought to be accurate. A lady once described this tendency to me in an admirably neat phrase: *Enjoliver n'est pas mentir.* Most of the wonderful *psychical* phenomena and ghost stories are dependent for their wonder upon this tendency, or upon coincidence. To cut off a sharp and ungainly corner here, to add a slight roundness there, to extend or to curtail an interval into coincidence—these are habits of the human mind so insidiously tyrannical, that I have rarely come across even truthful and trained minds in whom I should not feel forced to make allowances for these tendencies when weighing their statements in the accurate balance of truth.

The artistic desire for grouping, for composition, is directed by the fundamental principles of decoration—similarity and contrast, resulting in a just balance. The simplest form of grouping by similarity is in pairs. Now, as in every respectable drawing-room there must be a statuette on either side of the clock

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occupying the centre of the mantelpiece, so our great men must be forced into pairs: Shakespeare and Milton, or Goethe and Schiller, or Beethoven and Mozart, etc., etc. And this grouping in pairs, by its constant repetition and repercussion, gently and quite unconsciously fixes in our mind some form of belief or conviction that the types thus grouped are of equal character, merit or standing, and that there is some essential similarity of achievement between them. Now I deny that such a similarity of mental or artistic plane exists between the great men just enumerated: Goethe comes much nearer to being the genius corresponding to Shakespeare than does Milton, Bach stands nearer to Beethoven than Mozart, and so forth.

If this fallacious grouping by similarity is mischievous, it is harmless when compared with unsound grouping by contrast. It is, perhaps unconsciously, our hope that the establishment of such contrasts ultimately leads to equipoise or harmony. This leads us to counteract praise by blame; never to love or admire one thing without hating, despising, or depreciating another: if a person is good, he probably is a fool, if he is good at one thing he must be bad at another; he who loves many cannot love one intensely. These and their like are familiar propositions.

So in the case of science and art, it is supposed that the one cannot advance without the retrogression of the other; that an age is either an age of science

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or an age of art, an age of action or an age of contemplation. But in all such generalisations we forget the essential difference between the *organic* and the *mechanical*, between mind and matter. Human beings and the human mind are highly complex organic entities, and their functions, capabilities and potentialities are not to be measured by drapers' yard-measures or chemists' scales. A great man and a great mind are likely (so far as time and vital power permit them) to be great on every side; while normality and sanity, health of mind as well as of body, are most likely to be maintained by the harmonious exercise and development of every faculty and member constituting that complex organism. The emotional as well as the intellectual, the analytical as well as the imaginative faculties are likely to be big and strong in a big man; and, in spite of the necessity of concentration and specialisation imposed by time and physical power as a whole, that vital force cannot be maintained healthy and efficient unless every side of the organism is developed in proportion. Shakespeare and Goethe give the most striking evidence of this.

If the individual man is thus a complex organism, a nation or an age, which comprises large numbers of such individuals, is still greater. If an age or a nation is to be normal, there will be individuals representing all sides of activity, though all may have a stamp and quality which the careful student may recognise as characteristic of that age and that

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