

ARTICLE V.

THEOLOGY AND ART.

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It seems time to gain some closer and more sympathetic relations between theology and art. Not only has the close pre-Reformational connection and correspondence between these two been for more than four centuries severed, but it has even become imperfectly understood and inadequately recognized. Intense was the intimacy of their mutual relations in that vast pre-Reformational period. Theology was now reflected in art: art now anticipated the formal dogmatic teaching of the church. What majesty in the mission, and what reality in the message, of art when it embodied the best Christian thought of the time in forms which the humblest could understand, and which led their thought! The days had not come when art should be supplanted by letters.

In Puritanic and later days, strained and inharmonious relations have existed between man's artistic instincts and his theologic teachings. The spiritual problems of life, and the transitoriness of things earthly and human, have often enough been presented in ways that seemed to carry, by implication, condemnation and rejection of art. The need has arisen to make clear how sense may, and should, be made to minister to a richer spiritual service—how true an expression art may become, in a broad way, of Christian faith. It must be made clear that, in respect of the long conflicts between the classical and the religious, quite new possibilities of harmony have been introduced in the transfiguring light of the Incarnation.

The ministry of the beautiful, in color, form, and sound, must be claimed and consecrated, under a due sense of such consecration of art being a prime spiritual concern.

How should theology be indifferent to the attitudes of painting, sculpture, music, architecture,—should we not even add, poetry?—when its own God is but the Absolute Artist, with nature for his universal art work? The “interior bond” which, as Schelling pointed out, “unites art and religion,” may, perhaps, be said to be now so far recognized as to make scientific knowledge of art, if not more needful to a truly religious mind, at least more consonant with it. Beauty is finding equal place with goodness and with truth. Art is, to our late thought, with Emerson, “the path of the Creator to his work.” The Ruskinian teachings have greatly helped men to feel how religious is art, how fitted to inspire to belief in God, and worship in the spirit. Why should not these things be, when art is really spiritual and synthetic, as theology is? Why should they not obtain when art is teleological, and tends towards the spiritualistic ideal, not less truly than does theology?

As we have sought a deeper analysis of the spiritual sources whence modern culture is fed, it has surely grown more apparent to us how truly the Spirit of Christ is in complete harmony—nay, in perfect identity—with the spirit of beauty expressed in all true art, and, further, how really the spirit of a correctly apprehended Christianity is generator of the principles on which true art rests. It is the Christian spirit that has saved nature from the materialism that would stifle art, and may still save unto us the beauty of life, and the refining influences of art that shall have attained its apogee, and shall be really great. Then shall be seen the truth of what Sidney Lanier said, that “artistic beauty and

moral beauty are convergent lines which run back into a common ideal or origin"; so that, to the modern ethical spirit, the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty mean one thing. With the growing appreciation of the value of religious art, there has been increasing care that a materializing influence, flowing from its emphasis on the symbolical aspect of religion do not hamper or impede our transcending the merely external form. Art in every form has, without any sacrifice of its own character as genuine art, sought to relate itself, in an harmonious and sympathetic manner, to spiritual aspiration, which it with reverence desires to cherish and support. This it does even when, in seeking theological expression, it craves that "the beauty of the Lord our God be upon" it.

Art, then, is, in its own way—no less than theology—a revelation of the Divine. That seems, to me at least, quite as true of the history of art as of the history of doctrine. Incongruities and anachronisms find their way into even great art, and there is always call for theology to purge itself of that same leaven. It is not only a Paul Veronese that may shock us with grating anachronisms, but at odd times even a Raphael; and even an Albrecht Dürer may succeed in giving us a more correct conception of the great Apostle of the Gentiles than a Raphael, for art does not always attain its own highest. If the history of art might teach that the artist's work will live by its vitality rather than by its conformity to blinding tradition, the history of theology might surely be allowed to teach the same lesson. But, if art and theology are alike in that respect, there is a deeper sense in which they are yet more like.

It is this, that they both run back into essential and elemental spiritual idea—in the one case, that of the thinker, in the other, that of the artist. Indeed, even the great artist is just one who is great as thinker no less than as executant.

That which foredated art's protean forms, that which was first to the great artist, was not any combination of form and color, but the spiritual idea,—the ideal conception or construction,—and these divine ideas or spiritual conceptions are the last and highest gift which the study of art brings to us. Therefore do we find Schiller saying, that the true artist "will take his material, indeed, from the present, but borrow his form from a nobler time, nay, from beyond all time, from the absolute, unchangeable unity of his being. Here, from the pure ether of his divine nature, runs down the fountain of beauty, undefiled by the corruption of races and times, which fret far beneath him in troubled whirlpools."¹ Has theology no unchangeable essence to seek in like manner amid the changing forms of truth's expression?

Ruskin teaches in the most emphatic manner that the greatest art is just that which conveys the greatest number of the greatest ideas, and that nothing can here atone for the want of truth. To Ruskin, truth and loveliness rest on underlying principles, and the principles are none other than those which are found at the root of virtue and noble character. Frankly, I do not like Ruskin's quantitative standard as to the number of ideas: art is surely a qualitative thing, and the depth of the ideas counts far more than any quantitative enumeration of them. Alike in religion and in art, appeal is to immediacy of feeling, not to abstract conceptions. Hardly, therefore, is it to be wondered at that no words can express the unfathomed meaning, beauty, spiritual suggestiveness, of such a representation as, say, Raphael's "Holy Family of Francis First." The whole Louvre contains nothing finer, faces of mother and child being an inexpressible study. His "Saint Michael vanquishing Satan" follows hard upon it. It is the supremely

¹ Schiller, *Philosophical Letters*, No. ix.

beautiful soul of the artist we see, in such cases, shining through his art.

I have been but saying that the spiritual life is creative of the highest art, with its ideal beauty, freedom, unity, and power. And it is, no doubt, true in a sense that art is but the shadow of man. Man is himself, however, never to be thought of as a work of art: he is always more—a product of Nature and circumstances. Nor is it the whole of the case to say, as has just been said, that spiritual life is creative of art: it must be added, as Ruskin would insist, that the revelations of the spiritual world—the world of spiritual beauty—are given to us precisely through the forms and life of the natural world. For art is no lawless thing, however little it may be a necessary effect, but is rather, as was once said, the faculty of making imagination productive, according to law. Not without deep truth, therefore, is the saying of Keats—

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

But all this, of course, without any undue or set subordination of art—the expression of truth in sensuous form—to morality. Even Ruskin was apt to make art so much the handmaid of morals, as to fail of doing justice to beauty. It is enough to insist that beauty is immeasurably deepened by the presence of ethical spirit. We can still allow art to have worth in itself, form and matter being here inseparable.

For theology, spiritual idea has the same primary interest and commanding importance which we have just shown it to have in art. Theology will be vitalized when its thought runs back into the elemental ideas of spiritual religion, with their unspoken tenderness, depth, and power. Theology, if wise, will stand at the fountain of life, and, as in art, the soul of the theologian will be allowed to shine through his work, even when his thought moves in regions severely abstract and

intellectual. For the soul is surely supreme in theology as in art—only, it is a soul that thinks not less than it loves and wills. What tremendous interest life should be allowed to have for theology as for art!

A feature which should be recognized as common to art and to theology is the specific demand they make on tastes that must be specially cultivated. It may be quite true that great artists—Raphael, Rembrandt, Titian, Michael Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and others of like rank—made their appeal to the elemental feelings or emotions of the people. Thus, not even the casual passer-by can fail to be arrested by such representations as “The Descent from the Cross,” “The Assumption of the Virgin,” or “The Resurrection,” of that master of color, Rubens; or by “The Entombment,” of that other commander of color, Titian, in the Louvre; or perhaps even by representations like the Nativity, the Crucifixion, or the Resurrection, of so early a master of Italian art as Giotto, universal as these are in their appeal. But none the less is it the case that the average or uninitiated man sees nothing more in the greatest art creations than in those of direst mediocrity, until the faculty of appreciation has been cultivated and its powers called forth. He sees no more than he has learned to look for. And that may not be much; for Ruskin tells how apathetic he found men, even after art beauty had been pointed out for their appreciation.

Artistic discipline is a very distinct, positive, and necessary thing—for the beauties of Nature are not revealed to us unsought—not less necessary, indeed, than theological discipline. Art aims—as religion itself does—to teach and elevate, not merely to amuse, bewilder, and fascinate; but it does this by no form of continual restraint, rather effecting its end by its own peculiar discipline in the most natural and gracious of

ways. The elevating power of art is greatest just when it is most simple and grand. It may be, as Goethe said, that art is called art simply because it is not nature; but that does not keep it from being a most natural activity. The steep of moral ascent art has ever—however unconsciously—in view. The divinations of great art seem to come forth under the unconscious sway of the highest ethical spirit. But it is this same spirit which is purifying the highest conceptions of theology. The necessity for this special cultivation in order to art appreciation lies in the fact already insisted upon, that the artist has ideal thoughts which his keener sensibility and deeper insight would lay open to other men. True art, like true theology, will always be suggestive—art infinitely so. Art, as Browning says, “may tell a truth obliquely.”

True art is also, in a sense, religious,—has a passionate and often austere attachment to the divine, to divine reality,—so that, as Carlyle said, in art the godlike is rendered visible. It thus demands of its votaries that each fulfill the Latin poet's demand, *integer vitae scelerisque purus*, which is but a kind of ancient version of the Goethean call to Life in the Whole, in the Good, and in the Beautiful. For nothing is more certain than that sensual selfishness will degrade art: art's mystical worship of beauty may carry us far on the way to religion's grace of holiness and morality's elevation of virtue. When love takes up the task of life, it will expand and interfuse the things alike of religion and of art, so that they shall combine in one mighty revulsion against a soulless materialism.

Of course there will always be the important difference in their mode of appeal; for, while art will appeal predominantly to the emotional life, theology will make appeal preponderatingly to the cognitive elements in man.

Another important point of contact, it seems to me, between theology and art, is their demand, each in its own way, for sense of movement. The artist learns how greatly he needs to express, in his art, the movement of Nature: his view of nature is, if I may say so, not momentary, but successive—not static, but dynamic. It has been a great hour for the artist when he has made this discovery—a truth unwelcome at first, perhaps, but bringing power and gain to his work in the end. And theology has steadily made the same discovery, that its truths must be grasped and presented in their progressive movement and successive phases.

We are thus brought, naturally, to specific statement of the resemblance between theology and art in respect of the fact that they both possess vast historical relations and successions. Historical theology has been of increasing significance in the recent years of *Dogmengeschichte*, and the history of art has proved equally valuable. Art has had its great historic epochs, not less than theology. Ancient art comes to us almost wholly under the forms of sculpture and architecture. It is in the historic light that architecture attains the dignity of a science. Not a little did Grecian art owe to earlier Egyptian art, but Grecian art well repaid its debt by the lightness, grace, beauty, joyousness, with which it replaced the massive somberness of Egyptian architecture. Grecian architecture was epitomized in the Parthenon and the structures around it. The famous Church of the Madeleine in Paris is after this model. Grecian sculpture found scope for sensuous beauty and materialistic tendency in such statuary as that of Apollo, Venus, Bacchus. The peerless Laocoön deserves all praise, early and late. So, too, does the armless Venus of Milo, which one sees in the Louvre. Rome was not long in effecting a composite of Egyptian strength and Greek elegance and adaptation. Pass-

ing over Etruscan art, there may be noted such massive Roman structures as the Coliseum and the Pantheon, the latter contrastive in many ways to the Parthenon of Grecian art.

From the times in which the great religious systems of Egypt, Greece, and Rome subsidized art, we pass to the influence of the Christian system upon artistic endeavor. There should be remarked beforehand, however, the important influence of Byzantine art, whose most remarkable illustration is found in Venice. There we have the Church of St. Mark and the Ducal Palace, which latter was expressly termed by Ruskin the central building of the world. But the hand of the Byzantine period upon the world of art was a heavy one.

Now that ancient art was ended, the reign of Gothic system began. Pure Gothic held sway till the opening of the fifteenth century. When the Renaissance came, art's new departures were chiefly in painting, though architecture was by no means unaffected. From start of the fourteenth century to finish of the fifteenth, Christian iconography had a great time. It was marked by Giotto, Fra Angelico, Lippi, Verrochio, Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Perugino, and others, whose names are in the book of art history. Now we have come upon the age of great cathedrals and of mighty artists like Alberti, Brunelleschi, and, as we shall note presently, Michael Angelo. St. Peter's at Rome and the Escorial of Spanish art are monuments of this time. The sixteenth century shines by reason of its trinity in art,—Raphael of the beautiful soul, Da Vinci of sun-clear intelligence and genius, and Angelo of unmatched strength and skill. It can only now be remarked that the freedom and joyous power of art went with the Reformation. No attempt will here be made to follow painting through the great developments of artistic idealism in European art of the modern period. Enough has been said in pur-

suance of our aim—simply to show great historic periods existent in art no less than in theology. These phases of art carry their own teachings in historical philosophy with them, if we are willing to learn them, just as the historic phases of theology do.

In all this, the relation of art to personality should not be overlooked, any more than the relation of theology to creative spiritual personality. The free creative spirit is the very soul of the artist's work, motived as that is by the sense of æsthetic beauty. The higher movement is instinctive, and there is no compelling of art for morality's sake. There is, so to speak, a background of moral consciousness which, while leaving art free, insures that the good shall not be sacrificed to beauty. Perfect personality, like ideal art, never is, but always is to be, and æsthetic satisfaction is so framed as at once to reflect and to minister towards the developmental whole of personality.