

[Unpublished, n.d.]

CONCERNING CHRISTIAN AESTHETICS

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In the last few years the ostensibly evangelical community in this country has developed a rather lively interest in art. Christianity Today, Christian Scholar's Review, the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, and others give evidence of such an interest by having published several books and articles on the subject. The present piece aims to survey these views and point to a few conclusions.

First of all, some of the problems secular authors on aesthetics must face, require identification. Evangelical authors face additional difficulties when they try to relate art to Christianity. The first group of problems includes the elusive definition of beauty. Unfortunately this is so elusive that modern writers usually make no attempt to define it. In any case, a work of art need not be beautiful. The ugly can also be artistic. Discarding the concept of beauty, however, only increases the need of a definition of art. What is the common element in all works of art, beautiful or ugly, that causes us so to classify them? Presumably the definition is to be found in the purpose of art. If a chronometer is defined by the purpose of measuring time, art must be that which fulfills a particular function. Would anyone hold that art has no purpose, fulfills no function at all?

If this purpose can be stated, a step will have been taken toward the solution of another problem. Nearly everybody acknowledges an hierarchy of arts. They are not all on a dead level. People ask, and often answer quickly, whether or not the ballet is a better, a higher, a more perfect form of art than sculpture or architecture. Musicians are almost universally convinced that music outranks painting. But poets vote for poetry. An author on aesthetics must not only judge who is right, but must state the criteria for his hierarchy. No doubt many writers only dimly recognize their criteria; they may even inconsistently use incompatible criteria; but nearly everyone ranks the arts in some order or other. Presumably this has to be done by first determining the purpose of art and then determining which art best fulfills this purpose. In fact, within a single art, such as painting, one work, the Sistine Madonna, can be judged better or worse than another, Rembrandt's Night Watch, for example, on this same basis of fulfilling the purpose of painting.

If the purpose of art in general and of painting or poetry in particular is not merely a display of technique, if the content plays some role in the judgment, the ground is laid for distinguishing "great" art from trivial or even evil art. If a painting has the new moon in the east when day is dying in the west, does not this astronomical monstrosity, no matter how perfect the composition and technique, detract from its value? Can a poem talk nonsense and be a great poem, or, at least, can it be as great as a poem equal in other respects and which also speaks sensibly?

These are some of the problems that secular aesthetics cannot avoid. Nor can Christian authors avoid them. But in addition the latter must ask other questions, all of which can be condensed in the question whether the Scriptures imply a theory of aesthetics. Certainly an evangelical, whose formal principle is Sola Scriptura, cannot study any part of philosophy without considering Scriptural teaching.

It is not necessary here to discuss secular and Biblical aesthetics separately. The latter faces all

the problems of the former. Hence the present procedure can well begin with criticism of the sort of article that has been appearing in recent ostensibly evangelical publications.

These articles, so it seems to me, are usually defective in one or more of three points: first, they exhibit the pervasive ambiguity and meaninglessness of almost all literature on aesthetics; second, even when the first objection is not so obviously the case they either depend on or suggest invalid arguments; and third, they are with virtual unanimity deficient in supporting their contentions by Scriptural norms.

First. In the last few years a gad-fly has been lampooning the pedantic nonsense that emanates from New York's Metropolitan Museum. Theodore L. Shaw and Stuart Publications have produced Hypocrisy About Art, Precious Rubbish, and other titles which are not all hypocrisy and rubbish. The Met comes out as pontifically stupid.

If anyone think that this gad-fly should be ignored, do not more serious volumes on aesthetics testify to the unintelligibility of the subject? For example, can anyone deny that there is confusion and meaninglessness in The Art of Painting (chapter four and Appendix I) where Albert Barnes discusses the subject of form? Can the work of Elie Faure, Venturi, or John Dewey be adjudged more intelligible? Or, on music, note the pitiful attempts to define classical and romantic in Grove's five volume Dictionary of Music. There are, to be sure, better attempts than Grove's. The Oxford Companion to Music (revised edition, 1963) says that the term classical distinguishes music — largely the music written between 1600 and 1800 — which is characterized by a more or less consciously accepted formalism in which elements of proportion and of beauty as such [!] are emphasized from “romantic” music in which the main purpose is the expression of emotions, or even the representation in tone of ideas that usually receive, not a musical, but rather a literary or pictorial expression.

Although this is a relatively good statement for books on aesthetics, one notices not only that its term beauty as such remains unexplained, but also the meaning or mode of emotional expression is left vague. Then too, if proportion can be so defended as to exclude it from romanticism, form presents worse difficulties. Does not Beethoven show “form”? No, and this is surely important, is there any explanation of how or whether literary ideas can be expressed in tone. Inasmuch as one or two professors of philosophy claim for art a cognitive function not duplicated elsewhere, the point needs serious documentation.

Hardly any book on aesthetics defines its terms carefully. Even Plato, when he tried to define beauty in Greater Hippias, failed. Historical information, e.g. the formulation of the laws of perspective or the development from plainsong to counterpoint, has a proper share of interest and importance — it is also intelligible; but there is a dearth of definition. It seems that even the better books do not know the meaning of the words they use, while the sentimental gushings of “art appreciation” are utterly vacuous.

Now, if Plato himself, who so stressed definition and intelligibility, could do so little on beauty, one cannot be surprised that writers of lesser genius do worse. Yet the failures may be instinctive. If most of the books on aesthetics are largely unintelligible, it may not be because the authors are otherwise stupid, but because art itself is defective in intelligibility.

For example, there is no good objection against classifying art as a form of expression. So far as it goes, this is a good statement of the purpose of art. But it does not go very far at all. One should not go so far as to define art as the expression of emotion, for by the previous remarks this would imply

that classical art is not art. The trouble here is to make precise what content art can express. Few writers do so. One one occasion when the present writer had been examining Rembrandt's pen sketches in Amsterdam, an art connoisseur remarked that they "said so much." What they said, he did not say. Similarly music is called expressive. True, it can, like an ejaculation, express joy or sorrow, but not much else. It certainly cannot express Lincoln's Gettysburg address or the Lord's prayer. A choir director, a very good one too, exemplified the emptiness of musical jargon when he scolded his tenors and told them that the color of their tone should be more round. Apparently they ad been singing red, rectangular notes and he wanted them to sing circular, green notes.

When the Oxford Companion to Music defines romantic music as that which expresses literary or pictorial ideas, as if notes could express the cadmium vermilion flowers of an ocotilla and their differences from the light raw sienna sand out of which they grow, it says something so paradoxical that it ought to defend and explain its incredible suggestion by clear and extended argument.

How can anyone decided whether Mozart's Sonata K 545 expresses the chugging of a locomotive up the east slope of the Rockies or the eruption of Old Faithful? If some aesthete should finds this example too facetious, would he in all seriousness explain why L'Apres Midi d'un Faune could not have been called La Soiree d'un Lapin? In a painting this distinction would be immediately obvious. But even a painting cannot express Lincoln's Gettysburg Address — and this Address is indeed a work of art.

No claim is made here that music expresses nothing. The music favored by hairy left-wing hippies expresses the animistic savagery of the jungle. Rock cannot appropriately express worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Bach and Handel can. But even in these cases what music expresses, by itself without words, is very little.

So much for the first point concerning the unintelligibility of most books on aesthetics. Now, second, there is the matter of the invalidity of their arguments.

A recent article bewailed the narrow evangelicalism of George Eliot's parents, and without much disguise suggested that this was the cause of her rebellious atheism. The conclusion is of course fallaciously drawn. Evangelicalism is indeed narrow — it prohibits adultery. But her desire for freedom from such morality is a more probable cause of her rejection of Christianity than a hard childhood and the death of her mother.

Other articles have made other unfounded charges. The Puritans are constantly described as sour and dour. Ernest Boyd (Portraits Real and Imaginary, p. 109) was surely indulging in irresponsible imagination when he wrote, "Pleasure is the enemy, not evil, and so the joys of mind and body are under suspicion."

As for pleasures of the mind Boyd must have been ignorant of the Puritan concern for education; while J. Truslow Adams and Harlan Updegraff unconscionably misrepresent the literary index in Massachusetts. As for sensory pleasures, particularly the pleasures of art those who condemn the Puritans not only fail to make allowances for the difficulties of mere survival in an untamed wilderness, but also ignore the exquisite proportions and design of their doorways and everyday domestic tools.

Less reprehensible than these prejudicial fallacies are instances of trivialities, tautologies, and generalities that fail of constructive contribution. For example, H. H. Rookmaaker's article on Art in the

Encyclopedia of Christianity (Vol. I) does not say anything that can be branded false, but he achieves this desirable result by saying hardly anything pertinent. He states that aesthetic theory “concerns the nature of a Christian way of life.” So does counting calories. It is wrong, he says, “to pose an antithesis between one's professional life and the enjoyment of art.” Also the enjoyment of golf. Then again, he states that “There are many types of art” — as there are of engineering — “each fulfilling its own function.” But what the function of music, or of all art is, he does not explain; except that it is all for the glory of God. But this no more explains art than it explains investing in the stock market. The article contains little if anything that distinguishes art from other facets of human activity.

The second criticism has thus given examples of prejudice, falsehood, fallacy, and triviality.

The third criticism was the wide-spread, though not universal, neglect of Scripture by allegedly evangelical writers. Here an attempt will be made to shift from adverse criticism to something of a more constructive nature.

An evangelical theory of art, so far as art is amenable to meaningful statement, must be based on the teaching of the Bible. What is not based on Scripture, even if it should miraculously escape unintelligibility, could hardly be called an evangelical view. The fact that the Bible says so little about art, whereas its intellectually conceptual theology is voluminous, indicates that there is really very little to say. However, a Biblical student should try to collect that little. Such a summarization can be divided into material on utensils and architectures (combining useful and fine art), painting and sculpture, then music, and finally literature. Naturally the following is not exhaustive.

The construction of utensils and musical instruments seems to have originated among the rebellious and ungodly (Gen. 4:21-22). Later these forms of art were used in the worship of God (Exodus chapters 25-28). Still later great artistic skill was expended on Solomon's Temple and places (I Kings, chapters 5-7). From what is said, Solomon's Temple must have been an artistic triumph, surpassing even Hagia Sophia. Thus there is no Biblical prohibition against imposing architecture. That evangelicals today should build such expensive structures does not logically follow, but it would seem that some groups ought to pay more attention and avoid crudities in building.

The Bible has virtually nothing to say about painting, and its references to sculpture link it to idolatry. Therefore the Reformed churches do not exhibit a statue of Peter for the faithful to kiss its big toe. Painting must also be included, for the wording of the commandment includes every sort of likeness. Outside the church property, however, Rodin's Thinker seems to be unobjectionable, and his repulsive, shriveled, old woman can teach a moral lesson to majorettes and home-coming queens.

The Bible explicitly commands music, vocal and instrumental. Therefore some people must take time to learn composition, other people must achieve the skill to manufacture instruments and all people no doubt should improve their voices – circular green notes instead of rectangular red. The requirement of vocal music emphasizes the fact that music is an accompaniment for words. By itself music is not very expressive. Note that hymn books sometimes use the same music for two or three hymns. If music had a definite meaning, one tune could not fit two hymns, or even two stanzas of one hymn. But defective as music is in this respect the Bible commands instrumental music.

Music is the lowest form of art; literature is the highest. Musicians will raise their eyebrows and no doubt their voices against this proposition. But there is a reason for such a hierarchical arrangement. It depends on a presupposition relative to the nature of man and on an assumption concerning the purpose of art.

The purpose of art is expression. Of course this short sentence raises many questions. By itself it is uninformative. One should specify what art can and cannot express. These questions cannot be answered without having some notion of the nature of man. Here it is presupposed that God created man as essentially a rational being.¹ This implies that man's most valuable expressions are rational and intellectual. Therefore although man can express emotion, by screaming ouch, art becomes more human and valuable in proportion to its intellectual content. This does not deny that excellent technique may express triviality, evil, and insanity. It asserts, that what should be expressed is rational and intelligent.

Therefore the highest form of art is literature because only words have the full and clearest range of expression. The cliché, “one picture is worth a thousand words,” is basically false, though it is true enough in a blueprint. But, as suggested above, how many pictures would be required to express the Lord's Prayer or the doctrine of justification by faith? In comparison with these the importance of painting and music pales.

Of course art has a certain measure of importance. Embellishments of prose, and sometimes poetry, help to enforce the literary message.

I say sometimes poetry because, although prose can also be nonsense, nonsense seems to be an occupational disease of poets. It was with pleasure that I read a letter to the editor in the Eutychnus section of Christianity Today, which complained of the poems recently published. But what could be greater nonsense than the esteemed John Keats' Ode to a Grecian Urn? Consider:

“Truth is beauty and beauty is truth – that is all
One knows on earth and all one needs to know.”

Now, Keats's lines are not nonsense in the sense of being meaningless. They are nonsense in the sense of being ridiculously false. As a corrective to Keats and to the poetry of Christianity Today, permit me to offer a Kantian Ode to a Quartz Crystal.

Electrified, vibrating crystal stone
Thou foster child of science and slow time
Thou geologic witness with a tone
That tells a tale more rhythmic than our rhyme:
When old age shall this generation waste
Thou shalt remain and oscillating go;
Thy message e'er repeating without haste -
Space is time and time is space – that is all
One knows on earth and all one needs to know.

It is unfortunate that literary embellishment is in these two Odes used to inculcate falsehood. It should enforce truth. Crabbed language can express thought quite accurately, and even by its ugliness can sometimes jolt a person into understanding. Further, it is better to have unembellished truth than embellished falsehood. Nevertheless, artistic literature aids one's memory to make the comprehension of a doctrine a permanent acquisition.

¹ For a long argument supporting this position, see my article in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (Vol. XII, Part IV), The Image of God in Man. A more materialistic or physicalistic view is found in The Imago Dei and Christian Aesthetics (J. E. T. S. Vol. XV, Part III), by William A. Dyrness, but it has precious little to do with aesthetics.

The designer of the Delaware River Bridge at Vine St., Paul Cret, told his student, "Ornament construction; do not construct ornament." This is a good view of art, not only for a great architect, but particularly for a Christian. The principle of art for art's sake is pagan, suitable to its depraved exponent, Oscar Wilde. For a Christian art is subordinate to a higher purpose, and only insofar as it serves that purpose is it justified.