

Art in Literature

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Part II.

We rejoin our professor and his young disciple just as they are starting on their after-dinner coffee. The former is in the act of rolling himself a cigarette, but our student forestalls him with the offer of a long black cigar. The professor accepts it gratefully, for he knows all too well what is to follow, and he feels the need of some kind of fortification against it.

"Now, professor," begins the student, "you have probably surmised by this time that I have in my mind what I consider a suitable test for art. You are right. It is that of Arthur Machen: by no means a new one, for it goes back, at least implicitly, as far as Plato; but it is a forgotten or at any rate an unregarded one. The keynote of it is the word *ecstasy*. If there is ecstasy present in a work, then you have art there; if it is absent, no matter how clever, ingenious, talented, or polished the thing may be, it is not a work of art.

"Machen chooses ecstasy as the best representative of many words, each of which suggests the same meaning. You may substitute such words as rapture, beauty, adoration, awe, wonder, mystery, sense of the unknown. For a particular case, one word may be better than another, but ecstasy, as the symbol of withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness seems best to convey the meaning.

"Let us, before going any further, make a tentative application of our test. Using our standard of the presence or absence of ecstasy, I think a comparison of *Pickwick Papers* and *Vanity Fair* will indicate to us the two great classes into which all books can be divided . . . Of course you have read them?" Our student anxiously enquires.

In view of the fact that the professor teaches English Literature, his nod of assent is justifiably a rather pained one.

"It seems to me," pursues the student with all the remorseless inevitability of the Island Limited, "that usually you English teachers look upon *Vanity Fair* as

an undoubted masterpiece, a serious work of art showing vast insight into human nature; *Pickwick Papers*, on the other hand, is customarily regarded as a loosely written comic book, interesting indeed, but valuable chiefly as supplementary reading for High School pupils. Applying our test, however, I would unhesitatingly place *Pickwick Papers* in the same class as *Hamlet* or *Don Quixote*; it is in the class of fine or great literature. But I find that I cannot place *Vanity Fair* above the class of the stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*."

"Oh come now," expostulates the professor, "isn't that a bit thick?"

"Not at all," returns the student with a look so complacent as to be almost fatuous. "I like *Vanity Fair* immensely, and I choose it as the undoubted leader in its class. I enjoy reading it quite as much as I enjoy *Pickwick Papers*, but the question of liking or not liking a book doesn't enter into the problem at all, as we have already agreed. Art is there, or it is not; and the personal reaction of the reader simply doesn't enter into it. I think photographer rather than artist is the proper term to describe Thackeray. He never withdraws himself from the common life and the common consciousness. He is merely a showman with a set of pictures. He is undoubtedly a showman with an exceedingly clever and engaging manner, and an artificer of the highest merit; but where between the two covers of *Vanity Fair* can you show me that he appreciates the awe and wonder and mystery behind the pleasing set of images that he lays out before our eyes? Not even in the loves of his characters, apparently, does he sense the unknown or realize the mystery in which our lives are insolubly encased. Lacking this, he can never be called an artist.

"In its conception, *Pickwick Papers* is the very antithesis of *Vanity Fair*. It is a book of wandering. The unknown awaits us around every corner and turning. Mystery, remoteness, wonder, leaps out of every page of it. It is essentially a withdrawal from the common ways of life and that withdrawal is the beginning of ecstasy. It is the element common to the *Odyssey* and Kipling's *Kim*; to *Don Quixote*, and those weird tales of the wandering knights of the middle ages. In all of these works the same result is obtained—a sense of remoteness, strangeness, an insistence on the great enigma of our lives, on its

hidden mysteries, its radical inscrutability and unfathomability. Ecstasy is in those grotesque characters of Dickens—their very grotesqueness emphasizes the strangeness of life; ecstasy is in his dark old inns; in the obscure corners of *Fleetstreet* prison; in the main idea of the book—the theme of the wanderer. In short, *Pickwick* is a work of art.

“Four things, I believe, are essential to a work of art; not necessarily, of course, in the same degree of perfection. First, the Plot, which is simply the selection the author makes of the incidents and facts in the lives of his characters which he intends to portray. Then the manner in which he arranges these things in an orderly fashion and systematizes his material provides us with the second element, that of Construction. Next, the story must be written, and the words must be harmoniously and pleasingly put together. The proper arrangement of the sense, sound, and colour of words results in those pleasing cadences and combinations of sounds that we call a good Style. All these elements will have their place in a work of art; but in all of them there is a certain alloy of artifice. The fourth element, and the one that determines whether or no it is a work of art is the Idea or Conception of the work; the thing of truth and beauty within the artist's soul which has not yet been clothed in words.

“Fine literature, in short, is the expression of the eternal things that are mirrored in the soul of man. It depends upon and evidences the eternal rules, the artifacts of the universe which are the cause or principle of the things in the world about us. The things we see around us are only the copies or images of those eternal rules or Ideas in the mind of God. God thinks a certain thought and that thought is externalized—made sensible in the things we see about us. That is what creation means—the universe and all its parts is simply the outward expression of the Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was made nothing that was made.” Creation is simply the concrete expression of the Word of God and nothing created is intelligible except when it is related to that creative Word by Whom all things were made. All facts and things, then, are symbolic. They stand for some far greater and

deeper reality. Our senses may perceive the visible phenomena of the universe, but we understand these phenomena only to the extent that we tear through these outward symbols and seize upon the inner reality that they clothe. Real knowledge consists not in the apprehension of visible facts but in the understanding of the inner principle or intelligible idea which informs and causes those facts; which they symbolize to the understanding and in which lies their real meaning. Therefore, fine literature consists not in the mirroring of the sensible things around us, but in the expression of the eternal truths through the aesthetic medium of words. The true artist, consciously or unconsciously, goes beyond the mere fact and incident of his story to the Ideas they symbolize, reveal or manifest to the understanding. Good literature is simply the externalization by man through the symbolic agency of words of the eternal truths of God as he sees them through his own soul.

"Hence the work of the 'photographic' school, and the 'stream of consciousness' school should never be called art. They only present us with a series of meaningless phenomena, a succession of pictures, the mere outside of things. Their words stand only for the empty phantasms of the senses—they fail utterly to disclose to us the eternal reality behind things. Their work belongs to the shadow-land of reality and it has the substance of shadows.

"We can trace back the origin of this school in literature to that arch-heresiarch of philosophy—the smugly confident Descartes. A thing is true if we have a clear and distinct idea of it, says Descartes—as though we ever had a perfectly clear and distinct idea of anything. Roughly speaking, we can divide all people into two great classes, the so-called rationalists and the mystics. The rationalists are the clear and distinct idea group. They progress to truth by substituting another problem for one already solved. They can eventually solve everything. René Descartes and Lord Bacon are their Gods, and H. G. Wells is their prophet. The other class progress to truth by the endeavour to deepen their knowledge of the truths with which they are already possessed. The mystical solution of existence is the solution of the philosophers of the middle ages. 'Omnia exeunt in mysterium.' If the former are right, if the universe can be reduced to the simplicity of mathematical formulae, then Keats is a silly

imbecile and Homer worse than silly; and the writings of Jane Austin and George Eliot touch the heights of literary excellence. They alone, and their kind, in that case, are true to the nature of their being—they are insects of a superior kind, and their works are the works of insects of a superior kind.

"There is only one choice—the choice between the universal and the particular. The more a man humbly submits his being to the universal ideas of the mind of God the more he is a man, says St. Augustine. The more he pursues the transitory, the fleeting, the particular, the less he is a man. The more a work pays homage to the mystery behind things, the closer it approximates in truth and beauty to the Absolute Standard of Uncreated Perfection, the more it is a work of art. The purpose of the artist is the revelation through the accidental of the real, of the universal; the revelation of the eternal through the temporal. 'For Artifice is of Time, but Art is of Eternity.'"

If thou continuest to take delight in idle argumentation thou mayst be qualified to combat with the sophists but wilt never know how to live with men—*Socrates*.

The first ingredient in conversation is truth, the next good sense, the third good humor, and the fourth wit—*Temple*.

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever;
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness.

—*Keats*

