

THE SOUL OF ART

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND

IN ALL the endless tomes so generously housed by the world's ten thousand libraries, what single verse is more significant of the aims and heroism of man? Here is a question allowing scope for all the broad imagination and high anagoge we wish to exercise. There is that ambitious moral conquest prophesied in Milton's classical sonnet on Time. There is the pleasing prospect of progressive wisdom in those last lines of Bishop Berkeley's "Siris" which Sir Wm. Jones so charmingly set to rhyme. There is that piquant epigram of Martial on the reveries of men too old to share youth's frolic (which they would very likely do if they could.) There is that great Stoic exhortation of Epictetus that man must have reason and live according to Nature if he would be a happy soul free of pain and passion. There is that longing prayer of Wordsworth for God to give us *men* in the hour of civilization's need. And there is Ruskin's decision that no one can produce a work of Art having the least bit of appreciable merit or power to inspire who has not first given great thought and effort to the art of Living. Then there is also another more figurative but equally significant line: in response to R. T. House's circular letter to all the leading scholars, educators and literary men asking for their choice of the most beautiful line in the English language, Father Tabb found the following in Keats *Ode to a Nightingale*—"looking thru magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas, in aery lands forlorn." What is more symbolic and appropriate to our time than the fine expression "foam of perilous seas" and the refuge from them promised in looking from the magic casements of our books and friends, few and choice!

Or yet again we might look further and find the former Con-

gressional Librarian C. H. A. Bjerregaard in his work of scholarly end erudite inspiration entitled, *Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*, quoting Marion Prunyn's famous sonnet "We sat together in the afterglow." What delightfully exquisite contrasts of light and shade, love and anguish, creative joy and numbing sorrow, all grouped up at last in the philosophic conception that "Nature's brooding peace was everywhere." What clearer clarion call to the human soul was ever given genial expression than this footnote to our intimations of immortality. So too with Edmund Waller's sonnet on the soul's light in his symposium "On the Divine Poems." Even tho life becomes battered and decadent we have recompense in knowing that new light is let in "thru chinks that time has made" here and there in the walls of the soul's dark cottage. It recalls an experience once related by Tennyson that "Individuality itself thence seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being; and this not a confused state, but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility—the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction at all, but the only true life." Is there not a cheerful generous spirit of Buddhist renunciation of self about this unique vision of the overworld? No wonder Prof. Erskine views the *new* poetry as a return to the imagery and specific moralism of the *old*.

The spiritual foundation of every argument regarding the impending collapse of civilization (q. v. Bertrand Russell. Dr. Cram. Oswald Spengler or Prof. Shotwell) is the fact that man's nature is not adjectival but substantive, not acquisitive or veneered from outside but inquisitive and actuated by innate disposition within; and if the inward inclinations are not kept pure and wholesome no amount of external reformative measures will prevent both man and man's achievements from going to some ultimate destruction. This is why I believe that the notion claiming the persistence of memory after death is a doubtful hypothesis. It manifests itself in externals, in forlorn images of material existence, and thus cheats its own continuity of being, because the fleeting is not the eternal, the worldly is not the divine. Survival here or anywhere is no cheap sentimental affair, no easy stroke of the romantic imagination; it is an endurance contest, an elimination process where all the weak and lazy, incompetent and corrupt are gradually weeded out, leaving only

what is worthy and able to survive. Immortal souls are staunch and true and lovable, not ephemeral whiffs of grass blown here and there in the transitory world of appearance and illusory desires.

The genius of humanity being an inherent force for what is continuous and good, is ever aiming to create some tangible expression of its spiritual patterns, its inner ideals or needs. Thus are born the arts and sciences, the ever-recurrent civilizations and centers of culture which keep the world from being wholly a wilderness of brutes and fools. Just as there are innumerable cycles of reality and phases of existence unknown to man because arranged in other systems of sentiency than the one man's evolution has given him, so are there many ideals and needs of humanity that must be forced to the front and given prestige over the vain and trivial affairs which so often monopolize our attention. It is this genius for continuity and good which gives us original plans for betterment, which helps us flourish and survive because it sees into the beauties and secret charms of Nature, and from them derives its own dauntless measures of development and proficiency. Genius is forever at the brim of ambition to beautify the world and ennoble man's desires, it is eternally original, differently expressing itself in inexhaustible tolerance, feeling, vision and faith. It is this native spirituelle that always has some worthy symbol at hand to validate and justify our conception of and dutiful devotion to the Soul of Art.

Artistic genius has supplemented every great achievement and civilizing influence of man's social instinct; it has added culture to his native disposition and thereby made him less an animal and more a thinking and aspirant being. It gives us a better understanding and love of life, and makes us wonder why we were content with folly and finite interests so long; it even goes further and creates the things wherewith others, not primarily within its sanctity, may be similarly influenced and inspired to seek the higher life. And it is an enjoyable as well as provident condition of our being that the music of the other world must be translated and presented in the harmonious recitals of this one, else we have no other life than that of corrupt and worldly selfishness. With such concord of sweet sounds—nay, more, with such agreeable delights as come with the chatterie of living faith, love and friendly converse, the art of true plain living is counselled and exemplified. No grandiose discretion is required,

no adroit conduct is really ever in season to wheedle favors or beguile the hours away. Life is short enough without wilfully wasting or discounting its beauties and blessings.

No one denies, or should deny, that there can be no great art without great and noble passion. But it must be *pure* passion, not the bestial lust of sensualists nor the neurotic hysteria of Lesbaines; it must be emotionally refined and creative, not basely lewd and erotic. Art is the expression in some material form, design, surface or structure of pure intellect and emotion, of spiritual utility and moral inspiration. It may even be expressed in sensory rhythm, harmony of graceful motion as in music or the dance. In any case provided it is true Art and not a mere caricature, it is a system of expressed volitions, hopes and ideals which takes on an even higher symbolism or anagoge and thus more readily manifests its meaning and its inspiration to the chosen few who have receptive faculties. True Art, like honest religion and valid science, has no sham tricks to entertain the rabble, it works no shifty legerdemain in suave pretense of public instruction or delight. It is too busy otherwise and sensible of the fact that susceptible souls come willingly to its hospice, while the power of a thousand armies couldn't drive the vulgarian or the ignorant fool one inch closer than his own conceit might urge him.

Thus music is the highest art because it is in the clearest proportions purely intellectual and emotional, volitional and ideal in the action patterns it suggests. It is also the highest art because it is the least material, the least sensuous in its manner of expression, and demands the least physical anagoge or symbolism whereby we can understand and recognize its meaning. Only the masters themselves could so compose their works that we could read the whole trend and action of their dramas without one word of narrative or explanation. That is true Art. This is why the jazz spirit in any phase of would-be artistic expression (whether in music, painting, sculpture, architecture, drama, dancing, poesy or philosophy, it makes no difference) cannot be considered true art. And we certainly know how meagre are the really inspiring (even if occasionally accidental) productions of its scatter-brained devotees. It is indeed a "blue world" to be forever listening to the moan of off-key clarionets, fickle flutes and jazzbo saxophones.

Harold Bauer, the famous piano master, realized this when he told an audience recently at the Institute of Musical Art in New York that the only valid basis for an artistic career is an inner urge toward an ideal, an urge which stops at no obstacles to its accomplishment. Genius is the inexorable purpose to realize one's ideal concepts in some form of artistic expression, and it lets no petty umbrage, vice or woe restrict its scope or aim. It is the indefatigable industry of aesthetic love; but its love is not sensual, it is the love of beauty, of Nature, Life, justice, nobility, inspiration. If it looks on any of these with failing faculty or lack of preclusive fascination, if it gives up the race at the first few apparently useless struggles against the well-nigh overwhelming odds of a vandal and vulgarian world, we must be quite sure then that it is not genius, it is not genuinely consecrated to its prospective career, and whatever it may by chance of vacillating effort produce is not Art in its full maturity and significance. The fact is, it will not give up if there is really present that inward energy of spiritual valor, that innate urge and will for creative achievement, those *cidolons* (if you like Walt Whitman's term) which drive genius on to achieve the very pinnacles of Art.

The recent aesthetic war in Italy between Croce and Soffici on the one side as against Rossolo and Marinetti on the other in the controversy over jazz and futurism in Art has shown which of them had the true love and welfare of Art foremost in mind. The world is already more in need of virtue and validity than of mediocre and motlibriste expressions of exotic nature: there is no good excuse why the rational and romantic themes should give way to the *degage* and delinquent. With the certain amount of perseverance and effort required to realize a certain desire any fool can get there in a crass material sense, or maybe by mere accident fall upon the ever elusive theme that seems idyllic and entrancing, but it is very probable that he will not have sufficient sense or genius to develop it to maturity of symbolic power and expression. Art requires more than mere physical desire and the good offices of energy and fortune: it demands that there shall be inspiration, that there shall be creative ideals and spiritual consecration as well as romantic love and capacity for work: it requires an ideal moral energy as well as the mere desire to produce its conceptions in some tangible or symbolic form: it

puts the primary requisition on religion and righteousness rather than on mere recognition and reward. And so we find it implacably set down as both a moral and aesthetic law that without some appreciable grasp and practice of these requirements the hardest working fool in the world will remain mediocre and practically sterile of any worthwhile creative power or achievement.

The reason is that worthwhile art, verse, architectural design or musical composition cannot be dashed off in a moment's notice, in one's spare time like darning a sock or taking a week-end bath. No; rather do these expressions, provided they really intend to be artistic and fully sensitive of beauty and truth, demand the genius and power of one's whole being—and the Grace of God as well, if that holy aid and benediction ever applies to artistic works and achievements. Who is it, I should like to ask, that would make a few fickle flourishes of post-prandial strategy and, in all humble honesty of hope, expect to excel a lyric from Keats, an ode from Shelley, or a sonnet from Wordsworth? Who would assume to strike off in a few hours sonatas or symphonies or fugues more masterful than those of Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart or Bach? And who, I still ask, would take the bold conceit to use their cheap horse-hair brush to outpaint the soothing technique of Titian, the chiaroscuro of Vermeer, the love-science of Murillo, the color-balance of Rembrandt, or the facile elegance of style and chromatic nobility of Van Dyck's portraiture? No one should be so presumptuous of the ease with which they think true Art is created.

True Art is as difficult as child-birth, its conception and parturition being no simple exercise of sham emotion or superficial function. Look at the long-labored conception and vast amount of work represented in the classical frieze of the Parthenon; look at that required even to produce on the walls of the catacomb of St. Calixtus that antique style of beauty noticed by Kugler in the early Christian pictorial decoration entitled "The Dispute with the Doctors." Look also at Thorwaldsen's basrelief "Apollo and the Muses" with perfect harmony of line and rhythm of conception. There is no suggestion of what Spingarn calls "the seven confusions" here, altho the seven arts are indeed appropriately represented. And furthermore, how about those great majestic monuments of architectural skill to be seen, not only first created in Greece and Rome and

Rhiems, but copied masterfully in nearly every large modern city's public buildings!

We have our own intricacies of Art and cultural delight right here in America without going away and far removed to find example of inspiration by digging up exotic shores. Our own fancies, faiths, hopes, traditions, ideals and aspirations should make us creative of a native Art. Do we not have a soul peculiarly our own, the same as the Greeks or Romans, Byzantines or Goths? Then why in the name of heaven do we not express it in our own terms, our own vernacular if need be, but in our native moods and measures nevertheless. All that is necessary is to watch closely and with delicate moral discrimination to see that whatever we say and do and create shall not be vulgar, cheap or lewd: be very certain that we do not gradually lose hold on the eternal values and lapse into mere utility and mercenary zeal. If we guard well against these various items of delinquency, nearly anything else will at least stand a chance of being or becoming Art. But if our capacity is sterile of any native power to express itself or if it is unable to validate and justify whatever expressive power it does happen to possess, then I say by all means fly to whatever is best and noblest and of most suitable value in foreign, or even Oriental Art.

Taking *them* as patterns for our copying we will at least avoid our own sterility or decadence and, in the friendly counsel of their exemplary inspiration, we will perhaps some day share their gentle tastes if not their mystic and exalted genius for simplicity and faith. Even to occasionally burrow under the bland surface simplicity of Chinese painting or Japanese wood-carving is to find an utterly baffling symbolism of occult philosophy and esoteric religious devotion. Very few of these masters being wholly unmindful of the subtle influence inevitably cast upon their traditions and their mode of thinking and living by over two milleniums of Buddhst idealism, Zenist fatalism and Taoist nature-lore. If *they* can afford to be intelligent and artistically creative in face of problems of livelihood as persistent as ours and even more brutal and unmitigated by modern western invention and ingenuity, we most certainly ought to take courage and renewed hope, and try to revive ourselves out of our growing aesthetic despondency. Let us retire occasionally into our spiritual refuge of contemplation and conscientious analysis, and in

time perhaps we too can revision the reality, the true and sincere beauty, the ennobled and enlightened life which never fails to inspire the soul of Art.

From the manner of style and conception of the works that have been produced within the last half century, Modern Art is a plain syncretism of everything under the sun. All the past, present and future is given some measure of attention and an attempt is apparently made to place every shade of genius and skill on the palette of our cosmopolitan (if not strictly cultural) art. It is even more radical and emphatic in its departures than in its combinations; it is more exotic and arresting than any heretofore discriminating eclecticism would seem to warrant. Not only having a technique which dates back to Da Vinci, Rubens, Donatello, Van Dyck, Durer, Giotto, Titian, Rembrandt and Michael Angelo, but even a very specific and psychology of aesthetic situations from Aristotle and Vitruvius down to Hegel and John Stuart Mill, it has grounds for any one of its diverse manners of expression. But even without that very worthy and most estimable technical heritage, creative genius can still find means for expressing itself in a form of conception and design at once sufficiently original, moral and idealistic to meet the most exacting public taste. Nay, its subtlest and most essential function is just this creative power of neology, this originality and external charm of being able to produce exquisite beauty in novel or unexpected situations. It begins with this and ends with helping to validate and ennoble the very taste which seeks to appreciate it.

The general temper of contemporary taste in aesthetic appreciation is somewhat erratic owing to the sheer variety and aggressiveness of practically every domain of artistic expression. No one, not even a recluse connoisseur, can wholly embrace and understand the complete cycle of the Arts in one grand system of conception and valuation. It is too large a field. It is certainly not wholly within the scope of any such uniform method or viewpoint as will permit of the *same form* of appreciative procedure being applied to *all forms* of artistic expression. If such were the case, or even possible, where would be that first and most essential quality of genius (creative power)? Such a prospect would indeed be taken as archaic, or at least only on the assumption that individual art is convivial and blasphemous, conventional and mediocre (in other words, non-Art):

and that public taste is provincial and myopic, decadent and ephemeral (in other words, uncultured or vulgarian pretense rather than intelligent and sympathetic taste). And who would want to have the world groping around in such a wilderness of stagnation and death?

With the Pre-Raphaelite movement, so well initiated by Ruskin, Rossetti, Carlyle and Millais in the fifties of last century, came the explosion of a long restrained emotional conflict. Wm. Morris showed that part of it was just this assumption of habitual copyism and uncultured public taste. Beauty in Nature had been just about suffocated under the wet-blanket tactics of the analysts and theorizers, the would-be aestheticians who tied every genius they came across to this or that school, and read this or that influence into his life to account for every stroke of his brush or every whack of his chisel. Under such conditions natural beauty (not to say those who had genuine vision to see it) was in dire need of a set of champions who would restore her pristine naivete and easy naturalness, but above all someone who would forestall the sensual esthetes like Pater and the worldly utilitarians like Jeffrey and Ferguson.

No wonder then that Ruskin had more need for moralism than for history, that Carlyle had to use more rugged polemic than delicate pleasantry, that Rossetti developed more imaginative power than historical accuracy, while Millais relied more on the simple directness of example than on exotic passion for argument and eristic combat. For all their mistaken heroism these pioneers were sturdy chroniclers of a new symbol of tradition: apparently a new faith then, but really old as Nature, old as time and mind and love, for these are Nature's essence, and Nature was at the bottom of their idealistic faith. They were not seeking a pedestal for Art above Nature, but simply for the laws and purposes of Nature which were the foundations of Art. Hence, by going behind the ideal beauty which was postulated by Giotto and Raphael, they sought to paint reality as they saw it and express the truth in whatsoever form it might chance to appear.

As Miss Cobbe once showed, there are three orders in any artistic hierarchy: (1) the creative artists including painters, sculptors, architects, poets and composers of music; (2) the reproductive artists who are engravers, copyists, actors and musicians; and (3) the receptive or appreciative order made up of connoisseurs, dilettantes

and other more or less interested patrons of the Arts. This divisional distinction together with the psychological analysis of the peculiarities of their individual temperament and expression make up the four-point approach from which eligible viewpoint we can begin to understand some of the exclusive qualities as well as some of the inclusive values of Art. And any phase of modern Art cannot well be wholly appreciated if we do not seek to know whether or not its elements should be classified and validated or repudiated and ignored. We will save time and effort by ruling out the risque and pornographic, the fickle and inane, at the very start of any program of understanding and appreciation.

Nature is presented to us, not only to be observed and known directly, but also to be ideally represented and perfected indirectly in the vicary of human aspiration. Her forms are postulates of experiment and peirastic example, not laws of absolute necessity and finality on our conduct. Her interest in man's welfare and perfection is quite readily vouched for in the way she is forever trying to teach him to follow the true and righteous way. She does not exactly try to *make* him do right, but she certainly wields a wicked wallop whenever man gets smart and feels superior to her code of life. So then, if we have to swear a little by way of restoring the proper aesthetic viewpoint, our aim will not often be amiss and our efforts will not often be in vain. Artistic temperament therefore has degrees of creative and appreciative power which must be continuously developed in their proper order if one expects to be a genuine producer of Art, and they likewise must be continually looked for if we who philosophize about them expect to know what order of things we are dealing with, whether it is creative, reproductive, or simply dilettantic and patronizing.

(To be continued.)