

A THOROUGH AESTHETIC EDUCATION

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KINDERGARTENS, so far as their usual practice goes, are not the first dispensaries of knowledge to children. True, they teach a sort of abecedarian rote about certain simple things of everyday life, but it is more artificial than natural and hence is not the *real* kind of knowledge. To either teach or be able to understand the real kind of knowledge direct contact with what is being taught is always required, for then it is that the faculties of the mind actually obtain a grasp or tangible comprehension of what it is dealing with.

When first we dig our toes into the wet sand of the seashore and pick up a clear and shapely pebble or perhaps a gnarled shell now and then—that is the beginning of Life's symbol. It is also the beginning of wonder, knowledge, wisdom and reverence. Some of our companions, however, might make it a matter of great business and pride, assuming that here are laid the richest treasures of the ocean, all its shores and reefs and cavernous depths well sampled and represented in these few finite specimens. Others will take it all as a matter of daily fact and customary viewpoint, feeling that this is a scene and an experience probably as important, but quite sensibly no more so, than any other of the numerous incidents and outlooks of life. While still others will exercise that rare combination of aspiration and sensible interpretation which does not minimize the ideal possibilities nor exaggerate the actual proportions of what passes before them or within the scope of their observation. They will have some more or less accurate intuition that the great expanse, tides, depth, calm, storm, wealth and power of the ocean are emphatically there, but what a poor, narrow trifling grasp of their majesty and magnificence we can have who only see as far as our local horizon.

It is these latter who came closest to touching the secret spring which releases the eternal answer to Nature's sublime riddle. They seem strangely capable of bringing with them a persistent function

of sanity and emotional balance, knowing somewhat of the true expanse and majesty of the ocean compared with what we can see from our humble threshold, the unimaginable depths as compared with the petty shallows of human diving acquaintance, and the unexampled variety of submarine life and specimens of rare treasure as they would most likely appear to us if brought to the surface and set alongside of these few meagre-meaning and all-barnacled shells which we take such pains to gather and use for bricabrac to adorn our worldly refuge. As I say, this latter group of Evolution's children has the proper attitude of playing on the seashore of life and knowledge. But it is in an apparently hopeless minority compared with the two former sorts. Let us look a little further into the analysis of the situation and see which group it is to which we ourselves belong.

Dropping the symbolism and speaking in terms of modern thought our very first observation is that there is an appalling amount of garrulity and empty iteration about the aims and methods of modern aesthetic education which is bound to get on the nerves of any honest knowledge-seeker. And if he is thus disgusted and disaffected at the initial stage of his enlightenment, how can we expect him to survive normally and go on to the higher stages of ennoblement and transfiguration? Five hundred years before the polite age of Confucius and his political patrons the philosopher-viscount Chi Tzu was asked about silent example as an educational method, to which he replied that "a teacher's personal example gives the superior instruction, what he talks about gives the inferior instruction, and where there is too much talk a shallow instruction is sure to follow." What a clear perception of the true educational method and valurism; what an ancient anticipation of modern fallacy in nearly everything we try to learn from others! Surely it is an item of sad commentary to note that we must turn back the mottled pages of western world's vaunted educational progress three thousand years and change hemispheres altogether in order to learn a truth which applies with such remonstrant fitness to the cultural curricula of today.

Knowing as we do, or at least should with all the vast machinery of assistance at hand, that nothing is truer nor any oftener quoted as proverbial than the fact that the more raucous and blatant an age becomes, the farther removed from inward culture and spiritual power are its practice and exemplary instruction of the eternal values. It can teach no ideals or morals any nobler than its own and

if it is bent only on gross vulgarian aims whatever it teaches its youth will be but little different and certainly of no nobler example. With us in America today I believe there is yet time for revision and rehabilitation, for we have turned in the direction of decadence and delinquency, not so much for any deliberately vicious purpose as yet, but largely for that threadbare but trifling excuse "that it is more profitable." What is any more imbecile and fickle (to say nothing of its being superficial, selfish and irresponsible) than this sophist alibi of "the profitable"?

Just here enters the ethical criterion of all our conduct and expression, the spiritual element which alone can really animate and justify both Morality and Art. No program of education is complete and the resultant culture is neither thorough nor aesthetic without full functioning of this spiritual element and the rigorous application of the ethical criterion to all the deeds and duties of man. Under such a program of true cultural aspiration the educational approach would take place through aesthetic contact and a moral atmosphere. The various sorts of knowledge are to be analyzed, not in how they are derived, but in how they are applied; they are to be valued, not in how difficultly they were wrested from the secret bosom of Nature, but because they *can be used* to worthily expand and constructively benefit the cultural sphere of human life; and they are to be synthesized in that philosophic syncretism whose insular validity rests on spiritual facts and moral delicacy. The ultimate thing to know in life is how to come by a noble and enduring, not a vulgar, trifling or impotent, purpose or ideal. All other knowledges and pursuits will take color and complexion from this, provided we have it to start with; but we will not have it if our characters are weak, selfish, worldly, or if we let ourselves be cowardly, lazy or dishonest. The various sorts of beauty, inspiration and noble spiritual expression should be properly appreciated also, to the end that the analysis, valuation and creative emulation we are inspired to make will serve to validate and further man's destiny beyond the narrow material world. Any capacity or ideal less than this, even up to the point of thinking and believing certain fond but illusory notions, is just that far short of man's proper spiritual exercise, and cannot serve justly nor with cultural efficacy the normal function of knowledge in the world of conscious evolution. The moral aim of knowledge, like that of life itself, is that it shall be used, neither as a scepter of bigotry and oppression nor as the perfunctory bauble of fools and knaves, but for the enlightenment

and ennoblement of man. It is enough that we are all as yet mere children in knowledge without being so foolish also as to aggravate and pejorize the situation with our hoydenish conduct.

Veneer-culture is the incorrigible child of every vandal age, and ours is certainly fast coming to be a consummate age of vandalism and spoliation. Too much stress is put upon "teaching what is practical," leaving the young barbarians of school-age still crude and untaught, and never telling the unsophisticated student that the really practical does not include epistolary deceit for paternal favors, expedient opportunism after economic livelihood, false publicity on one's income-tax report, nor the universal ravine of industrial commercialism. Thence when allowed to grow up under such hypocritical tutelage, no wonder the poor numskulls in later life think that all the sciences have only a materialistic validation or worldly utility, that all the arts are industrial and subject to financial exploitation, that there is nothing so noble or refined that they cannot work some sort of mercenary mischief upon it. What a pretty pass for an age of Power and Progress!

Too little emphasis is put upon teaching what is truly beneficial to the individual and hence ultimately beneficial also to society at large. Too little attention is given to the selection of teachers who can bring a sturdy personality and inspiring personal example to the classroom or lecture-hall; and practically no instruction is provided which would call out the better nature of the student and expose him to direct contact with activities which are ethically noble, ideal for character-building, aesthetically inspiring or otherwise urgent of honest creative effort toward artistic taste or originality, thorough mental gymnastic and intellectual training, and devout spiritual affections. We too readily let the divergency of culture serve as an excuse to dodge the aids and action-patterns counselled in the days of sovereign wisdom and reverence, as when in twelfth-century Japan, the cartoonist priest Tobasojo with his vigorous deer-hair brush used to ridicule his brethren for their Buddhist follies, and draw for their "better instruction" the scenes of heroic valor in the romantic past. So too does our artistic genius suffer a certain lack of delicate discretion and creative perseverance, for long since the exacting days of Mill, Ruskin and Rossetti our educational methods in art as well as in every other sphere of man's active spiritual interest have gradually ceased to be sincerely noble "endeavors after perfection in execution." We still have mad anxiety for production, but we are not so careful to demand that there shall be sincerity

of function, nobility of motive, or perfection of execution in the making of our goods. Our chief insanity looks only for vendible values and has no eye for features which do not resemble the materialist's worldly fallacy of putting quantity before quality in art production.

Our schools and colleges and universities nowadays seem incapable of turning out anything but rote scholars, copy writers, and empirical philosophers. There are always, and too significantly from the point of view of an autotelic moral aesthetic, more mechanical engineers than creative artists, more sham psychologists of salesmanship than real psychologists of human imperfection and cupidity. We are almost hopelessly lost in a maze of special handicrafts, industrial arts, useful sophisms, applied sciences of this fad or that cult, all madly clawing and climbing over each other trying to crash the gate of predatory success. We do not recognize that the true cultural path is still open, even readily visible and beckoning to the keen-minded who see it leading back to the pristine thoroughness and perfection of artistic principles in life and the education which prepares properly for life. Their faculties are alert to the situation but they are powerless to turn the vulgarian away from his worldly passion. This is why the common burden of their plaint is that our age is alarmingly deficient in spiritual power, that it is even on the verge of actual delinquency from the simple lack of a durable foundation in moral and aesthetic education.

By the term, moral aesthetic in education, I do not mean merely a studious training in the history and technique of ethics or art-theory, but a replical cultivation of all the innate powers of human faculty and creative genius so that some dependable guarantee may be had that the student will go forth from his studies with a conscientious aim to keep his love of beauty pure, to give spiritual expression to whatever originality his nature contains, and thus to live according to the morally beautiful Christian principles laid down in Galilee nineteen hundred years ago. I mean the balanced development of man's internal economy, not the selfish imbecile adornment of his body or his house with trappings of luxury and extravagance. And by internal economy I mean his functions of head, heart and hand in all his thoughts, affections and achievements, his receptive-analytic, affective-emotional and creative-energetic powers howsoever they are expressed through his faculty for objective perception and subjective discrimination of whatsoever comes under the category of the Beautiful and Sublime. In my sense of the terms a

thorough aesthetic education (partly supplemented by artistic parentage; fortunate circumstances, congenial friendships, and personal competence) is what gives us moral and intellectual, as well as pure or artistic and applied or industrial genius. Genius is *made*, cultivated from grandfather's cradle to grandson's maturity, and never born into the world by chance. There is no tychism of genius any more than there is a tychasticism of the works of genius.

The truth then, not often glimpsed and less often fully appreciated, is that genius as an aesthetic center of spiritual development is consciously made, not suddenly born nor inspired by momentous miracle. Of course there must be present the inclination and the will-to-do, the artistic nature and disposition toward beautiful things must be there first; so that, with these and starting early enough, artists and creative thinkers can be produced instead of ditch-diggers, professional politicians, vulgarians and jazz-babies. Genius in any sphere of human accomplishment does not cease its endeavors with what is merely adequate to the occasion; it endeavors to go further, even trying to execute perfection itself, realizing the Beautiful as being far nobler and more universally sought after than the merely practical or expedient. Anything less than Beauty, Purity, Truth, Sublimity, howsoever elegant or sensuously appealing, are considered neither satisfying nor inspiring, and the apparently eternal quest continues. If it were humanly possible to give concrete expression to such an idea as that of absolute perfection, or even to realize its *whole* significance in one single ecstatic conception, creative genius would be at the end of its perennial quest. It is just this unattainable ideal which keeps true art and genius alive, ever lured to match wits with the Divine Genius of Nature and the Overworld. An ideal of this scope and nature is *required* to be sufficiently cosmic and non-human to always be just a little beyond the reach and probable ambition of men, so that their attempts to realize it will not conflict nor conspire with the skill-limits of their creative genius in its true aesthetic function.

It is a function which exists for every good and noble cause, being in no way restricted to the arts of form and color, melody and rhythm, symmetry and perspective, although it does very often carry these same credentials to apply in other fields of artistic activity. It may be observed openly at work in developing the finesse of French literary criticism, in giving accurate terminology to English-American philosophy, in harmonizing the methectic rationale of Italian science, in reviving the religious naturalism of Chinese poetry,

or in extolling the political honesty of Australian laborites, and even going so far as to present some figurative design showing the exact proportions of law and largesse in each situation; but in any case we can see that the ground plan of *aesthesis pro alio* (feeling for others) serves for both Morality and Art, and may be traced through every process of creative action.

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For one thing I believe that a thorough aesthetic education would gradually tend to rejuvenate our modern philosophy out of its *passé* biologism and blase psychologism which try to make us think that it is a general intellectual gymnastic whose procedure abounds in favors one way or another to this or that school of thought, this or that age of culture, this or that national esprit. Like Flaubert's acrobatic allegory, it is too much an apprentice-philosophy to the motives of some other movement which is a departure from the spirit and procedure which should work together in a really mature and independent philosophy; such a precocious condition being usually apparent as soon as we examine into the circular assumptions on which the clumsy apparatus is dragged along, vainly anxious to keep up *some* appearance of membership in man's cultural progress. The aesthetic touch would render even a real philosophy more vital to the affairs of men because it would bring out the romantic idea which gives charm and inspiration to everything we recognize as true and good and beautiful. And through this it would color all our educational programs with the good counsel that humble wisdom is better chosen than proud knowledge, remembering well the old Samurai motto of "Wide Spaces: Small Voices"; that is, the more we experience and understand, the less we say about what others ought to think or do.

However, in our humanistic dilemma of external perfection and internal conflict, of material organization and spiritual chaos, the specious necessity too often comes forward with the demand that cultural education, too, and the nobly reflective instruction which is fundamental to it, must be cast down, trampled upon, and despoiled of its charms and virtues. But we are in no such mood of treachery; we know that this false exigency results only from our blind and blundering commercialism, and in such knowledge of the whole commercialistic hypothesis. Cultural education does well to aim toward an aesthetic morality, but it will also do well to begin with a very careful but determined war on all those cheap and mer-

enary practices which make man the vulgar worldling that he is. It might, right at the outset, have to make some adequate preparation for combatting what Professor Sumner called "the innate laziness of human nature." In short then, a truly cultural education will lay large store by the requirements of Morality and Art; it will consist in a thorough training in the general principles of life and conduct and a thorough exemplification in the specific principles of the beautiful, noble and sublime; and its aim will be symmetrical development, so far as they themselves will consent and co-operate, of everyone who has the desire to experience and the capacity to appreciate all that is understandable and beneficial in the general structure as well as the particular functions of Art, Science, Philosophy, History, Ethics, Religion, the whole sphere of the Humanities in fact, and how to think and plan and work and create a better world in the light of their common idealism and aspiration.

The fundamental point of beginning is not to bother with aesthetic priorities or critical hermeneutics but to make stern decision in favor of the artistic viewpoint, to start right out by being somewhat of a spiritual esthete oneself and take up that romantic position of love and aspiration toward all Beauty, Truth and Righteousness which is itself a creative center capable of turning a whole nation's history to better account. From this new intellectual viewpoint and affective position we will be able to see intelligible signs of moral and aesthetic principle which we overlooked before, we will begin to make fairly sensible interpretation and perhaps occasional artistic expressions of our own, and before long we will find ourselves growing gradually capable of all those cultural refinements of affection and creation which mark the soul of all artistic taste and genius. That is, we ourselves would begin to live the aesthetic life in some appreciable degree identical with the ideals of those whom we look to as the world's great masters in Morality and Art. And in so doing we would soon discover that we were required to be more than mere dilettantes and casual connoisseurs; in order to fully *live* the aesthetic life we would have to also embrace their eternal viewpoint, partake of their consecrated function, and make similar constant resort to the peculiarly wise innocence of their alert minds and courageous hearts. Possibly we cannot yet approach to any very adequate emulation of their skill, achievement or constancy of creative production; but we can certainly be of similar general attitude and approximate their general capacity for refined conception and artistic expression.

Thus, the common man will be conducting his life as one of the fine arts, just as he has for so many centuries been conducting it as one of the industrial arts. He will not longer demand of his life sensory satisfaction and physical comfort alone, nor will he rest content with simple and ephemeral art productions wherewith to satisfy his erstwhile mediocre taste; but he will instead honestly endeavor to reach up in a certain adequate and measurable degree to the exalted plane of the masters who are the ideal instructors and exemplars even to those who *do* produce the simpler and more popular works of art. Hence, even to be an ordinary everyday connoisseur in the historical and cultural finesse of life as one of the fine arts, one must take his ground and basic training in those principles adopted by the great artists of history, in those modes of living which are proven to be the true aesthetic practice because they have endured the eristic erosion as well as the critical corrosion of one hundred centuries.

But to emulate the masters themselves in the very perfection of their moral and creative art—this is a note of rare decision and devout ambition indeed. One thing is certain in the conduct and idealism of such a high-aspiring one: he will leave all the vainglory and vendibility of the modern vagaries in art to those tyroes who are more opportunistic than artistic in their tastes and motives. His best attention will be turned rather to those age-old and securely established principles of virtue and beauty which the artistry of ten thousand years has extolled and exemplified in every possible aspect and sublimation. The one prevailing reason why he chooses to take refuge with them is because they have no ephemeral variation nor illusory artifice in which to play him false or truant in the perennial art of which he has announced himself a champion, even a martyr if the raucous vandalism of the age demands such penalty for righteous and artistic living.

It is in this sense then that I am trying to outline the conduct of life as one of the fine arts, or as Soren Kierkegaard naively named it by equal power of anagoge, the aesthetic life. For, when we come to think of it under the aspect of cultural education, it is the duty of every man to himself, his community, to the world and to God, to live the *good-life* as best he can; to know the wild naturalness and experience some of the ideal emotions of that first *real* religion that was actually *lived* in Galilee.