

THE SANITY OF ART

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The Sanity of Art by Bernard Shaw

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1908

PREFACE

THE re-publication of this open letter to Mr. Benjamin Tucker, places me, not for the first time, in the difficulty of the journalist whose work survives the day on which it was written. What the journalist writes about is what everybody is thinking about (or ought to be thinking about) at the moment of writing. To revive his utterances when everybody is thinking about something else; when the tide of public thought and imagination has turned; when the front of the stage is filled with new actors; when many lusty crows have either survived their vogue or perished with it; when the little men you patronized have become great, and the great men you attacked have been sanctified and pardoned

by popular sentiment in the tomb : all these inevitables test the quality of your journalism very severely.

Nevertheless, journalism is the highest form of literature ; for all the highest literature is journalism. The writer who aims at producing the platitudes which are "not for an age, but for all time" has his reward in being unreadable in all ages ; whilst Plato and Aristophanes trying to knock some sense into the Athens of their day, Shakspear peopling that same Athens with Elizabethan mechanics and Warwickshire hunts, Ibsen photographing the local doctors and vestrymen of a Norwegian parish, Carpaccio painting the life of St. Ursula exactly as if she were a lady living in the next street to him, are still alive and at home everywhere among the dust and ashes of thousands of academic, punctilious,

archæologically correct men of letters and art who spent their lives haughtily avoiding the journalist's vulgar obsession with the ephemeral.

I also am a journalist, proud of it, deliberately cutting out of my works all that is not journalism, convinced that nothing that is not journalism will live long as literature, or be of any use whilst it does live. I deal with all periods ; but I never study any period but the present, which I have not yet mastered and never shall ; and as a dramatist I have no clue to any historical or other personage save that part of him which is also myself, and which may be nine tenths of him or ninety-nine hundredths, as the case may be (if, indeed, I do not transcend the creature), but which, anyhow, is all that can ever come within my knowledge of his soul. The man who

writes about himself and his own time is the only man who writes about all people and about all time. The other sort of man, who believes that he and his period are so distinct from all other men and periods that it would be immodest and irrelevant to allude to them or assume that they could interest anyone but himself and his contemporaries, is the most infatuated of all the egotists, and consequently the most unreadable and negligible of all the authors. And so, let others cultivate what they call literature: journalism for me!

The following remnant of the journalism of 1895 will, I hope, bear out these preliminary remarks, which are none the less valid because they are dragged in here to dismount the critics who ride the high horse of Letters at me. It was undertaken under the following circumstances. In 1893 Doc-

tor Max Nordau, one of those remarkable cosmopolitan Jews who go forth against modern civilization as David went against the Philistines or Charles Martel against the Saracens, smiting it hip and thigh without any sense of common humanity with it, trumped up an indictment of its men of genius as depraved lunatics, and pled it (in German) before the bar of Europe under the title *Entartung*. It was soon translated for England and America as *Degeneration*. Like all rigorous and thorough-going sallies of special pleading, it has its value; for the way to get at the merits of a case is not to listen to the fool who imagines himself impartial, but to get it argued with reckless bias for and against. To understand a saint, you must hear the devil's advocate; and the same is true of the artist. Nordau had briefed himself as devil's advo-