

SEERSHIP AND PROPHECY

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Seership and prophecy by R. Dimsdale Stocker

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R. DIMSDALE STOCKER

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POETRY AS A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL INFLUENCE

"It is dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, and the poet re-attaches things to Nature and the whole."—EMERSON.

IN his recently translated work "On Art and Artists" Dr. Max Nordau, the brilliant writer and critic, has once again set himself the task of attacking certain conventional opinions which yet contrive to obtain currency among the less thinking. One such opinion which he has ventured to challenge is the altogether unwarranted assumption that art can possibly be conceived of as existing for its own sake. And his book opens with a vigorous protest against any such view of the subject. Writes Dr. Nordau :

"I deem this theory false, and a hall-mark of crass ignorance : for psychology and the history of civilization and art, the history of all art, prove irrefutably the vanity and worthlessness of the concept that denies to art any other task and mission than that of being beautiful."

Whilst he is prepared to allow that art is primarily a subjective activity, and that it is more especially allied to the sphere of psychology, Max Norda is inclined to see in it the most powerful stimulus to emotion, and as it tends, therefore, to favour the excitation of certain physiological processes and to induce special pathological states, which are inevitably accompanied by neural, muscular and allied movements, so it becomes, to his mind, one of the most potent factors in the practical life of mankind—which fact, if it be established, goes to support the conclusion that art can, in reality, subservise no other end save that of utility, since it will be the means of promoting both mental, moral, and physical culture.

Any question such as this, it is almost superfluous to remark, is open to considerable controversy. Possibly no single subject, indeed, admits of such wide diversity of opinion as that of which we happen to be speaking. At the same time, recognizing that we may that the manifold functions of art may remain for many of us an open question, it must be exceedingly obvious that the whole matter forms an exceptionally vital subject to all who have the "higher side" of human life seriously at heart.

All too often it happens that the "mission" of art remains an unconsidered trifle. It is deemed to be sufficient that it should be a means of relaxation, pastime for one's leisure moments. It is in consequence of this, one may suppose, that those kings among mankind, the prophets and poets, and all who employ the creative faculty in the exercise of

their respective talents, are seldom appreciated at their true worth, excepting by the few. Yet so long as the cult of the beautiful is conceived of as an end in itself, and as totally unrelated to the truth-side of things, matters must remain much as they are.

Speaking for myself, however, and for many who share the opinions which it will be my endeavour to embody in the course of these remarks, art is neither suitable for high-days and holidays nor a matter which should be regarded as hopelessly out of touch with the ordinary affairs of life. Realizing, as we must if we are in the habit of thinking, that man is, by nature and the force of circumstance, an idealist at heart, we can well bring ourselves to see that the stuff of which his dreams are wrought is, after all, his staple article of diet. Not only must we, therefore, see that he is especially open to the exquisite influences which appeal to his sense of the beautiful, but we must regard these influences as the blessed means of imparting the very things whereon man may be said to subsist. Thus it is that, as the beautiful becomes illumined and transfigured by the spirit of truth within him, we are permitted to witness the celestial marriage, which has been so dramatically portrayed and prefigured in the myths and legends of the religious faiths the world over. And this lands us in the region of the moral order, wherein the good itself becomes the supreme object of contemplation and devotion.

What, now, I hold to be true of art in this, its widest sense, is especially so of poetic art. In poetry we have possibly the most purely intellectual mode

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of æsthetic feeling. At the same time, the intrinsic value and purpose of poetry are to be discerned rather in its emotional appeal than in any other of its aspects.

If we would fully appreciate the position which the poetic art may properly be said to occupy, it becomes necessary for us to consider the place which the poet himself has held in human experience. This is to be gathered from the very signification of the term which we employ in order to designate him. On consulting the dictionary, it is found that the word itself means nothing more than a *maker*—a definition which, as we ponder the problem, becomes particularly luminous, since at all ages the poet has stood forth as one who has created and fashioned the thoughts which, as time has gone on, have fulfilled themselves in the ears of succeeding generations. Even to this day we find the poets anticipating the tendencies and discoveries of the age, which from the psychological standpoint possesses no little interest for the more philosophical inquirer.

From the very earliest periods of human history poetry has invariably been associated with the spirit of prophecy; and when it is remembered that this gift, so earnestly coveted by the Apostle of the Gentiles, is akin rather to seership than to the predictive art in the vulgar or popular sense, its exalted position may readily be accounted for. Like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos of old, the poet is one who is specially privileged to hold communion with the celestial hosts. Thus he becomes the mouthpiece and interpreter of the Most High, whose messenger he is

None among the greater poets but can claim to have held converse with the unseen spirit of things ; and they who have put on immortality in the heart of the race have ever been they who have uttered that which lay within the sphere of the unconscious, waiting but opportunity, in the shape of a mind of requisite sensibility and magnitude, to announce itself. Such a one was Shakespeare, and such also have been Homer, Dante, Goethe, Shelley, Browning, and Tennyson, all of whom have earned everlasting recognition and gratitude, for no other reason than that they have conducted mankind to the well-springs of life, to the source of truth and beauty, wherefrom the nations have from age to age renewed their strength.

Upon the several messages of these transcendent souls there is little occasion that I should dwell. That the declarations which they bequeathed us were inspired, in every sense and in the only sense, we may be perfectly certain. And the fact that these have stood for a species of "faith beyond the forms of faith" for many who may have lost touch with theological religion, points to the irresistible conclusion that poetry may indeed be regarded as bearing the closest affinity with the spiritual life of man. On this account alone we cannot but affirm that the most intimate connexion must exist between art and conduct.

To embark upon a lengthy disquisition in regard to what may be said to constitute the distinctively poetic quality is far removed from my intention. In truth, it may be doubted whether any precise or

adequate analysis of poetry is capable of being furnished ; for the instinct would appear to be nothing less than an innate faculty of the human intelligence whose presence is wellnigh universal. In order, however, that we may have before us something approaching a clear idea as to what composes its essential element, I would venture to suggest that poetry amounts simply to an attempt, or series of attempts, to reproduce and embody those rhythmic movements which accompany the excessive exhibition of emotion and that heightened sensibility which is the outcome of an elaborated psychic organism. From a certain point of view, the entire universe may be reduced to nothing but a number of scales of vibrations, of varying intensity, the human organism itself becoming in this way nothing but an instrument capable of initiating and responding to certain orders and ranges of vibratory movement. Thus the impassioned language of the poet—his metre, swell, cadences, rhymes, and rhythms—need only be conceived of as so many exquisite reactions to those higher laws and forces which are playing within him, and to which his soul is more or less consciously attuned. With most of us at best only an unconscious response is possible, but with the poet it is otherwise. Unlike the dwellers in the valley, his ear has caught the strains of celestial music from the summits.

But, exalted as is his position, his function differs only in degree from that of all other living things. Thus, whilst the flower, by absorbing the vital properties of the soil, the sunshine, and the atmo-