

**THE RESPECTIVE EFFECTS OF THE  
FINE ARTS AND MECHANICAL SKILL  
UPON NATIONAL CHARACTER; AN  
ESSAY READ IN THE THEATRE,  
OXFORD, JULY 5, 1848**

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The Respective Effects of the Fine Arts and Mechanical Skill Upon National character; an essay read in the theatre, oxford, july5, 1848 by John Conington

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**JOHN CONINGTON**

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21.

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(3.)

AN ESSAY,

READ

IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JULY 5, 1848.

BY

JOHN CONINGTON, B.A.,

FELLOW OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE.



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## SYNOPSIS.

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INTRODUCTION . . . . .	7
DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE PRACTICAL SHOWN TO COINCIDE WITH THAT BETWEEN A TASTE FOR THE FINE AND ONE FOR THE MECHANICAL ARTS . . . . .	12
EFFECTS OF EACH TASTE ON A NATION . . . . .	
I. IN ITS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS. . . . .	14
OBJECTION FROM THE CASE OF ATHENS ANSWERED . . . . .	18
II. IN ITS SOCIAL ORGANIZATION . . . . .	23
III. IN ITS PHILOSOPHY . . . . .	26
IV. IN ITS POETRY . . . . .	30
V. IN ITS THEOLOGY . . . . .	35
SUMMARY OF RESULTS . . . . .	37
WHETHER A NATION CAN ACQUIRE NEW HABITS . . . . .	39
POWER OF THE MECHANICAL TEMPERAMENT IN DEVELOPING THE SEVERAL PARTS OF THE NATIONAL CHARACTER IN THEIR TRUE PROPORTION, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE CASE OF ENGLAND . . . . .	42







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THE distinction between the Ideal and the Practical, between the pursuit of beauty and that of utility, is one so frequently made in common discourse, and so applicable, at first sight, to the present subject, that no surprise can be felt if any one should be inclined to adopt it as a complete statement, and make use of it to describe the two developments of national character, under the respective influences of the Fine Arts and Mechanical Skill. Yet no less natural is the feeling which would lead us at once, almost without examination, to throw aside any such compendious account of the matter as superficial and inadequate. The mind is at first captivated with the breadth and apparent symmetry of general views; but it is soon led to distrust them on finding how rarely they rest on a

satisfactory collection of particulars, till at length its most obvious instinct is one of aversion from the whole method of generalization, and it is ready to see in the antithetical terseness of an aphorism a sufficient presumption against its truth. In approaching the question here proposed it will be well for us to guard against either tendency, recollecting that if such sayings are "one man's wit," they are no less "all men's wisdom;" in other words that the phrases in which society embodies its judgments, however hastily taken up, are sure not to be without their value as approximations to a correct standard.

Here, as in all other questions connected with social science, the materials for forming a conclusion are somewhat various, though they may be generally reduced under two heads, the facts of history, and the facts of the individual mind, the same which we are accustomed more loosely to distinguish as experience and reason. No doubt the two often appear to run into each other; experience, viewed in itself, is a mere chaotic mass<sup>b</sup>, which requires the light of reason to make it intelligible even to its most devoted worshipper; while reason, besides being in a great measure simply a record of mental experience, is almost invariably guided in its con-

<sup>a</sup> Lord John Russell's definition of a proverb, recorded in Mackintosh's *Life*, vol. ii. p. 473.

<sup>b</sup> Coleridge, *Table Talk*.