

**THREE GREAT TEACHERS OF OUR
OWN TIME: BEING AN ATTEMPT
TO DEDUCE THE SPIRIT AND
PURPOSE ANIMATING CARLYLE,
TENNYSON AND RUSKIN**

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Three great teachers of our own time: being an attempt to deduce the spirit and purpose animating Carlyle, Tennyson and Ruskin by Alexander H. Japp

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ALEXANDER H. JAPP

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1865.

P R E F A C E.

THESE essays were composed mostly in the intervals of arduous professional duty. The writer states this not with any idea of forestalling criticism; but rather that his readers may know that the task has been taken up *con amore*. The nature of the views advanced, and the persistent attempts made to find out and to fix not only the progressive unity of life and work in each of our three great writers—Carlyle, Tennyson and Ruskin;—but a unity also of spirit and purpose binding them together into a suggestive trio, will, he fondly hopes, favourably recommend them to the daily-augmenting ranks of the thoughtful and inquiring. At any rate the author commits his volume trustfully to the hands of those who may be interested in any worthy word spoken regarding either or all of them.

But indeed when one thinks of the great need there

is for a wide-based reform in our extravagant ways of thought, and above all, in our foolish and empty habits of life, he cannot but wish that the influence of these three—an influence so directed towards drawing men back to truthfulness, simplicity and genuine affection in all the relations of life—could be brought very widely to bear. For though men “run to and fro” and by that means truly knowledge is being increased, yet with the knowledge the curse comes ever, sending men thirsty and fevered to wander over the wide arid desert of “circumstance,” there only to fail grievously in the search for blessedness in all forms of external finery and falseness. This is the price we pay for progress; the tax the grim tollman of civilization exacts of us. But in everything there is compensation. Sour smoke has possibility in it to become clear lambent flame. The artificial involvements of our time may be transmuted into pathways of return to primitive repose, simplicity, and fruitfulness. They who can and will, at great self-sacrifice, direct us wisely in this matter, surely deserve not only grateful recognition but “blessings and eternal praise.” Carlyle, Tennyson, and Ruskin have taken upon themselves to prescribe the cure for the “vague disease” of the century.

Surely then it more and more behoves us to try to discover what these, our three great men, really mean—to get at the root-principle, the spirit out of which they write; and if it be a true one, then to practically adjust, not only our words and thoughts, but also our acts and lives thereby. This is the claim they have over us as thinking men if they are indeed our Great Teachers. The writer finds they are one in aim and spirit and desire. Their words may vary slightly, but they soon resolve themselves into one grand all-including monition:—“Be simple, single-minded, prudent, true, genuine men.” They are pre-eminently a sort of missionaries these three, preaching each in his own way, according to opportunity, truths old as the Old Testament; but practically forgotten and departed from. Broadly taken, one may say they separate themselves from nearly all the other writers of the time by the fact that they have each asserted their place in literature without the sacrifice of their individuality. As they value their specific character and distinctive qualities as men, so do they reverence these in others—making the maintenance of them the very basis of the great reform they unitedly aim at accomplishing. Through individual regeneration and intense personal conviction, all improvement that is

worthy is to be accomplished; consequently there is nothing narrow, dogmatic or sectarian about their writings; but a noble universality of thought and spirit throughout. Individual goodness is with them the root of all progress and of all national prosperity. It is the little seed-grain which grows into a great world-tree, spreading grateful shadow for thousands.

Our very external culture is cursing us they say, by sucking away all true individuality of life or of conviction; producing thus an over-refinement whose children are desire, unrest, sensualism, and barbaric trust in material resources. The respect for individuality felt by these men soon accordingly transforms them into art-critics essentially, as seen from one point of view. They discover an element of cold pagan intellectualism, opposed alike to true progress and true Christianity, sapping away the lives of men or making them fruitless, empty and diseased. They enter on a contest for maintaining the sacredness of life. That contest under varying names, and assuming in different circumstances different features, is traceable throughout all Christian history. It may be said to simply circle round the question whether or not art in its lower or heathen form shall be called in to decorate and sen-

suously limit Christian doctrine ; or in other words, the meaning of the higher facts of human existence. This may seem a very paradoxical way of putting the matter ; but it is not the less the true one. For all religious struggles ultimately resolve themselves into these questions—What is true art ? and what are its relations to true religion ? All down the stream of time we see men struggling for some clear solution of this problem, and actually leaving real work undone in the hope of obtaining a satisfactory settlement of it. It is the perennial difficulty this—the reconciliation of man's higher aspirations with the circumstances out of which he has to shape a form for the fitting expression of these—a form, which shall not be remote, unreal, or distant on the one hand, nor hard, materialised, and pagan on the other. Indeed, properly speaking, the idea of a State or civil order implies a Church, and that again implies art. If men meet they must have symbols—the very forms of your church doors or windows will crystallize themselves into expressions of spiritual experiences, and therefore you must guard against the introduction of any material element which will have in itself the tendency to drag the spirit earthward simply by being constantly before it.

A great moral and spiritual reform, from whatever point it takes its departure, will thus very soon of necessity carry itself into the region of art. It was not out of a desire of destruction merely that Cromwell and his soldiers so ruthlessly destroyed the art in the churches they entered in Scotland and in Ireland. That other reformer enunciated a deep principle when he said, "Pull down the nests lest the crows come back to them!" An art that forms round about a system will have some vital affinity to it, and will be apt even by being looked upon to stimulate feelings akin to those out of which the system sprang and which intensely characterized the devotees. The immobile dreamy nature of the Hindoo first of all expressed in his religion and his philosophy would yet have some freedom, some possibility of *otherness*, if the expression may be pardoned; but when one man of gift above his fellows formed one of these ugly abnormal figures, the worst and weakest characteristics of the people would be objectified, confirmed, and fixed. And so it comes that a high and noble reform must soon interfere with art. Even Plato would exclude certain poets from his Republic. The heroic Savonarola could not long escape, after he had entered on his career of reform, the neces-