

Aesthetics, Art and Education:

A Christian Look At Art*

by Duncan Roper

I think that most people would concede that music, painting and literature should have some place within the school curriculum. However, there is probably less agreement and less appreciation as to the character and place that these particular arts and the aesthetic side of life generally should have within the life of the school.

The present task is one of trying to give some insight with regard to the educational goals of aesthetics and art in a way that would hopefully provide some help to teachers and parents as they seek to nurture children to serve the Lord in these areas of life. To fulfill this task, even in a preliminary form, we need to develop insight with regard to the aesthetic and artistic functioning of God's creation and particular ways in which these should be developed in a Christian school within the Australasian cultural setting. Only insofar as our insight on these matters is illumined by the light of God's Word will our task in these matters bespeak a truly Christian character.

Let us first of all make some faltering steps in seeking to gain some insight into art and aesthetics against the setting of our created, fallen and gloriously redeemed world. As there are any number of unhealthy and idolatrous attitudes and habits of thinking guiding our consideration of this whole subject, I think [160] it needs emphasising at the 'outset that art and aesthetics have their home in this world that God has created and redeemed in Christ. They have no other existence than the one belonging to this creaturely life.

As God's image-bearers, called to serve God in caring for and unfolding the riches of God's creation to His glory, we should give the aesthetic, the artistic, the imaginative, their rightful place in life. This is not one that should protrude or dominate anymore than it should be rejected as evil or unimportant. It should be recognised as an integral

* From *No Icing on the Cake* Jack Mechielsen (ed.) (Brookes-Hall Publishing Foundation: Melbourne, 1980) 159-172

part of God's wonderful creation, to be cultivated obediently by men and women in loving service .of the Lord Yahweh.

Because art is sometimes considered esoteric, the preoccupation of the talented and the expert; and because aesthetics is sometimes regarded as a somewhat doubtful branch 'of philosophy, I think that I should not only affirm that art and aesthetics have their home within the creaturely functioning of God's creation, but also go on to try to make same attempt at locating this creaturely zone of existence with a view to trying to appreciate how God would have us respond to it in obedience. I want to do this in a way that is neither philosophically abstruse nor artistically esoteric. Rather I wish to appeal to your concrete, down-to-earth life experience.

The Zone of the Aesthetic

We all know something .of the experience of climbing a hill or mountain, enduring the physical exertion for the reward .of drinking in the view of the surrounding countryside. We all know the experience .of walking along the sea-front, looking at the vast expanse toward the horizon, taking drafts of invigorating, clean salty, sea air into .our lungs. Moreover, in the course of strolling along ,the beach we all know the experience of contemplating the variegated shapes .of driftwood that have been cast up, sometimes carefully selecting suitable pieces to decorate the house, garden or office.

In each of the cited instances we, as human beings, are responding to the typical aesthetic functioning of the natural .objects of [161] God's creation. In this respect it is of same importance to realise that the various reactions of wonder, contemplation, quiet detachment from the busy concerns that properly occupy our attention, are not merely 'subjective' - in the sense that they have no other cosmic reality than belonging to our own feelings. Natural creation does indeed function as aesthetic subjects insofar as we are, able to appreciate the aesthetic dimension of its functioning. It needs to be emphasised, however, that this faculty of aesthetic appreciation of the natural creation requires cultivation; it is not something that we are born with. In this respect there is a similarity with our analytic faculty. We possess both by virtue .of being created as men

and women. Both, however, require to be shaped and unfolded in the course .of life experience, with obvious educational implications.

Let us consider some other examples from our full, concrete experience .of life. We all know that we do not eat and drink simply because we are hungry or thirsty. Indeed, because of the aesthetic concern for taste, the activity .of eating and drinking in human life becomes extraordinarily complicated. For example we desire variety in our food and drink. Imagine having your favourite dish for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day of the week - even if it was rich in all our bodily requirements! Consider the problems that result from the malfunctioning of the aesthetic concern for taste; food preparations deficient in biotic needs, the habits of gluttony and drunkenness, etc. The answer to the problems that arise from such life situations however, is not to ascetically deny the aesthetic dimension. Health concern in respect to "food and drink certainly means giving due attention to correct functioning of the .aesthetic and other aspects in which the actual events of eating and drinking take place. Again, we all know that we do not wear clothes simply to keep warm. Nor do we build houses simply to keep the rain out. We do not plant gardens simply to grow vegetables any more than we eat them solely to meet our biotic needs.

In each of these activities there is an aesthetic side to the way we exercise our cultivating task - the variegated taste of foods, 'the design of houses, gardens and clothes. But it never occurs in [162] isolation. The zone of the aesthetic is located in a coherence with other elements or zones within creation. There is also an aesthetic side to the way we use language, to the way we write letters, to the way we give a lesson, a lecture or deliver a sermon. There is also an aesthetic side to a mathematical theory and to an essay on jurisprudence; to the way we pray and sing hymns or psalms.

With regard to natural objects, the shaping of our aesthetic faculty is limited to that of an appreciation of the aesthetic functioning of God's creation. However, in regard to the aesthetic functioning of creation insofar as it has been humanly formed, the aesthetic aspect functions in a new way: it enters as an element in the form-giving activity itself - whether this be in the preparation of food, the making of clothes, the building and design of houses, the use and development of language and so on. In turn this makes further demands upon the shaping of our aesthetic insight and skill: the variety of

human cultural activity requires both appreciative and executive aesthetic insight. The nurture of this insight, together with the skills needed to execute them are part of the stuff of aesthetic education.

I have attempted to point to typical instances arising from our concrete life experience in which we may recognise the aesthetic functioning of God's creation as it is upheld by His Word. I have not tried to identify the aesthetic element too closely; nor shall I spend too much time trying to do so, partly because I believe it to be a very difficult matter, and partly because I'm not all all sure that this is the place to embark upon such an exercise. Nonetheless, I would like to distinguish two basic features of what is involved. The first is what Calvin Seerveld¹ has terms 'suggestion' or 'allusiveness', and the second is what I prefer to call 'stylistic coherence'. In the former the focus is upon the flows, motions, pauses, jumps, surprises, driftings and other 'allusive' features present throughout creation. In the latter the focus is upon the way these and other features of creation are woven into a stylistic coherence. Thus there is a stylistic coherence to a tree, to a leaf, to an animal, to a city, to a park, to a home as much as to a painting, to a piece of music or to a poem.

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One major point should be clear by now, I hope. Although art is a specialised activity requiring aesthetic gifts for which not everyone has the talent, all men and women are called to develop their aesthetic insight - both appreciatively and executively - so that their lives may exhibit a richness and their cultivating activity a styleful suggestiveness that bespeaks a deep, comprehending, wholehearted obedience to the Lord Yahweh.

The Imagination

Another feature that I would like to draw out for special attention is the Imagination. Few would deny that what we know as art has a great deal to do with the imagination. Indeed, for that very reason many Christians have considered that art should be avoided. Has not the Lord 'scattered the proud in the imagination of their own hearts'

¹ C.Seerveld, *A Turnabout in Aesthetics to Understanding*, Toronto: Institute for "Christian Studies, 1974, pp.12-13. Also his *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, 2nd ed., Toronto: A.A.C.S., pp. 74-75.

(Luke 1: 51)? There can be no denying the problems that arise in life through the idolatrous and perverted use of the imagination. For this very reason it is imperative to gain some Christian insight into the working of the imagination and try to get straight the place of its products within the world of God's creation. I shall therefore try briefly to open up some of these issues before discussing them specifically in relation to art.

Imagination as 'Picturing'

In our everyday experience of God's creation we learn to recognise certain typical things and events: plants, animals, people, houses, forests, churches, wars, earthquakes, birthdays, marriages etc. We also learn something of how these various things function and how people react to different circumstances. In this way our experience of God's creation feeds our intuitive expectations as to the outcomes of events and the actions of people. However, our insight and reflection with regard to these typical realities is not limited by our concrete experience of them. We are able by means of our imagination to experience these realities second hand in the mind's eye. Moreover, this ability of our imagination is the basis upon which a learned language is able to create events and acts of the typical realities of God's creation in a shared imaginative experience with other men and women. [164]

Consider the following three extracts:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable house and happy disposition seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (*Emma* by Jane Austin)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was very different. Born in Geneva, he was a Swiss, a Protestant, and almost of lower-class origin. He never felt at ease in France or in Paris society. Neglected as a child, a runaway at sixteen, he lived for years by odd jobs, such as copying music, and not until the age of forty did he have any success as a writer. (*A History of the Modern World* by R.R.Palmer and J. Colton).

When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his elventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton. (*Lord of the Rings* by J.R. Tolkein).

Despite their differing character, each of these extracts uses words that we readily appreciate as referring to the typical realities of our everyday experience of God's creation: people, their character, their aspirations, their various stations in life, things that happen to them, birthdays, towns, countries etc. As we read them, each conjures up an elemental picture of people and places which lives in our imagination. We do not experience these people and places directly but through their living in our imagination. Furthermore, the elemental pictures that are formed in our imaginations from each of these extracts may be further filled out and developed if we were to read on further. The possibility of forming these images is quite independent of whether or not the descriptions refer to actual people and places. It is solely dependent upon the ability of our imagination to picture the experiential world that is symbolised by the language we use to describe our variegated experience of God's creation. Now this 'picturing' activity [165] of our imagination need not be set off by the lingual communication from someone else. We are able to picture from within the resources of our own imagination, and, if called upon, to communicate this to others - using language or some other means of communication. Quite obviously there are similarities to be drawn here with the picturing that occurs in dreams and hallucinations. However, for the present purposes it would not be fruitful to explore the similarities and differences involved. I simply wish to point out that upon the basis of our intuitive grasping of the typical realities we experience in God's creation we are able to picture such realities in a way that they literally live in our imagination, and that this picturing activity is independent of whether or not the pictured individualities refer to actual people, places, events and so on. Finally, I would like to suggest that this picturing of the imagination is a part of the reality of God's creation. It is not another world or a separate reality. It may differ from concrete reality, but it is nonetheless part of the fullness of the creation that is subject to the law of God.

Imagination as 'Inventive Reconstruction'

If our imagination is able to picture in the way discussed above, then what real significance is to be attributed to imagined objects and events which either do not refer to real individual things, people, places and events, or else do not do so with the required canons of accuracy? There are two typical answers given to this problem: one is to deny that such products of *the* imagination have a relationship of reality to the things we experience everyday, with the result that poetry, for example, although enjoyable in the attitude of aesthetic contemplation is technically nonsense.² The second and countering attitude toward the imaginative world current today frankly admits its irrational, unscientific character, but rather glories in this admission, virtually setting up the dream, the hallucination and the artistic world of the imagination as the source of revelation.³

I would suggest that from a Christian viewpoint, both the cited views of the truth or reality of the world of the imagination are far from adequate, and involve distortions that result variously from an idolatry of man's analytic life on the one hand and his [166] free imaginative life on the other. To develop something of an alternative view, I would like to consider the three literary extracts cited above from a somewhat different angle. My initial purpose in introducing these examples was to exemplify the functioning of our imagination as picturing and to emphasise that thi~ activity was not dependent upon whether or not the images of our imagination corresponded to actual

² I. A. Richards, 'Science and Poetry' in *Criticism, the Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment*, edited by Mark Schorer, J. Miles and G. M. McKenzie, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958.

Margaret Macdonald, 'The 'Language Of Fiction'', in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, edited by Joseph Margolis, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, pp. 424-437.

³ This attitude has been fostered by Romanticism, Idealism, Existentialism as well as Freudian and Jungian Psychology. Even such diverse, figures as John Dewey. 'In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience.' *Art and Experience*, New York: Capricorn, 1958, p.105;

Susan Langer, 'The only way we can really envisage... ultimately the whole direct sense of human life, is in artistic terms.. .Self knowledge insight into all phases of life and mind, springs from artistic imagination.' *Problems of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957, p. 71; and Herbert Read, *The Nature of Literature*, New York: Horizon Press, 1956, p. 105.

individual people, places or events. However, we can also use them to illustrate the problem of the reality of those things populating our imagination that do not correspond to actual individuals in the usual sense of the term. In the three cited examples we considered J .R. Rousseau, Emma Woodhouse, and the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins. If we were living in Paris or Geneva during the eighteenth century, we would no doubt have had the possibility of meeting Rousseau in the street. The same cannot be said of Emma Woodhouse with regard to nineteenth century England; as for Bilbo Baggins, the very time and place in which anyone might meet a creature resembling him is itself a problem. However, because we cannot meet the figures of our imagination on the street does not necessarily mean that they have to be viewed either as technical nonsense or as vehicles of a pseudo-mystic-revelation.

I would suggest that imagining is a mode of human consciousness that differs both from scientific theorizing and from the mode of the perceptual experiencing of the typical concrete realities of God's creation. However, I would suggest that all three modes of experiencing the world rest upon the same bed of our intuitive grasping of the reality of God's creation. Moreover the three modes of consciousness are not isolated the same bed of our intuitive grasping of the reality of God's creation. Moreover the three modes of consciousness are not isolated from one another but rather constitute points of focus that are able to inter-penetrate in our actual experience in many different ways. Imagination functions creatively in science and everyday experience as well as in art. Scientific knowledge enriches not only our everyday experience but also the possibilities of imaginative experience. Moreover, our everyday experience is deepened and enriched both by scientific insight and by a well-developed imagination (such as the ability to tell imaginative bedtime stories for children that arise from some aspect of our shared daily experience). However, this interpenetration does not blur [167] the distinctiveness of these three points of focus. Everyday life is focussed upon the typical individualities of creation (people, plants, houses, dogs, towns, schools etc.). Scientific theorizing is focussed upon the functioning of these typical individualities) under the sustaining and upholding power of the Word of God, in an endeavour to abstract this functioning in terms of a precise law-formulation. The attitude of the imagination is to universalize everyday experiences through a telescoping of multiple meanings into an imagined concrete experience. The characters of literature for example, do not arise as creations ex-nihilo. They arise from the author's experience

and insight of the functioning of God's creation. From the pool of these gathered in sights he or she inventively reconstructs a world of places, people and events which, in some measure, is an attempt to grasp the more universal conditions of human life in an imaginative exploration that permits the nuance of exaggeration to enhance and exemplify the meaning of creation through an imagined concrete setting of people and places. In this way, for example, certain typical places, people and events of Victorian England are inventively reconstructed in the novel *Emma*, with the purpose of grasping the general culture and social conditions, as well as characters that lived in them in an imaginatively conceived set of circumstances. The *Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, has no particular historical or social focus. It is the imaginative exploration into a more general consideration of the condition of man.

Vanity and Wisdom in Imagination

'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the issues of me'. (Prov. 4:23).

'He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts' (Luke 1:51).

From a Christian viewpoint, all of man's life springs from spiritual roots that are anchored in the religious commitment of his heart to the true God or !to an idol. From his religiously anchored transcendent selfhood flow the many issues of life affecting personal character, social relationships, social structures, [168] scientific life and the life of the imagination...Thus, if we are to correctly discern the working of the imagination, in addition to examining the structural features "that we have so far examined, we must also give attention to the directional features. The latter have to do with the whole question of obedience to the ordinances of God as they are bound to the covenant of God with man in creation. First and foremost this involves the primary religious issue: Who is God? Who reigns over creation - Yahweh or an idol? Secondly, this involves the question of obedience to God's ordinances in family life, personal life, social and political life, in industry, in education unto the uttermost parts. Thy direction of the imagining activity of men is therefore shaped at root by the spiritual background of the world and life view they share and live out of. When man's ill lagining activity is shaped and led by idolatry, then indeed God scatters and judges men as they are caught up in the vanities of their own inventive reconstructions. The Christian calling,

however, is clear: to develop the imaginative faculty in a way that is fed by a deeply Biblical view and experience of life, seeing the realities of creation and of man's place within it, of sin and of restoration through God's grace as the warp and woof of the life we experience not only in everyday experience of the typical individual things of God's creation, but also in the attitude of the imagination.

Art

So far I have made very little specific mention of art. I have done this purposely - in the belief that the basic issues to which we should address ourselves, if we are serious in striving for an educational life of greater obedience, are more those having to do with the 'creational stuff' out of which art, amongst other things, may come. I say this for the following reasons: first, we should not think that our children (or ourselves as adults for that matter) will learn what they should about art simply by a study of the worlds of art as these have been historically formed. Many devote their whole lives to this activity, and, whilst providing many valuable detailed insights, very often have little insight into what its all about. Second, we should primarily be educating our children neither to be artists nor to appreciate art. Our task as God's co-workers is one of opening up children to the riches [169] of God's creation so that they may increase in knowledge and insight and be the more effectively shaped to serve the Lord joyfully and obediently within it.. Insofar as art is concerned, I think that prior attention should be given to the opening up of the aesthetic dimension of creation and of the development of the faculty of the imagination.

However, art is very important, and consideration of the aforementioned should include and lead onto a rich and healthy involvement with the arts. Lack of space precludes me from giving anything by way of detailed discussion of particular arts, and I shall content myself with stating the following theses regarding the meaning of a work of art, its relation to the wider reality of God and his creation, and the manner of experiencing a work of art.

- (i) A work of art is imaginatively conceived by the artist, and, as such all effort should be made to appreciate and experience the work in this way.

- (ii) A work of art has a concrete form resulting from the shaping activity of the artist in his attempts to objectify his imaginative insights in an aesthetically rich manner using skills appropriate to the chosen medium.
- (iii) Although the work of art functions in all dimensions of God's creation, it is qualified by its aesthetic functioning. As such it should be judged primarily according to the excellence or otherwise of its allusive qualities and of the way these are shaped and woven into a stylistic coherence.
- (iv) Just as the imagination envisages from a certain perspective or world and life stance, so the work of art, as something to be imaginatively experienced, bears a characteristic spiritual stamp deriving from the perspective- or vantage point embodied in its concrete form.
- (v) Men give concrete form to the process of exercising their cultural task of shaping and opening up of God's creation by means of a Cultural Ideal. (Examples are: the Corpus Christianum ideal of the Middle Ages, the Liberty, Equality, Fraternity ideal of modern democracy, revolution and socialism, the free enterprise of American business life, the Communist ideal of a classless society etc.). A cultural [170] ideal is, nothing more than the positive form given to the driving impulse of the spiritual direction of this cultivating activity. As such, cultural ideals are frequently embodied in works of art, which thereby sustain, develop and give critical comment upon their outworking as they help to give shape to the way of life of which they are part. As examples of this we may consider the role of Mass in the Counter Reformation, the Opera in the High Italian Renaissance, the Oratorio in 18th Century England.⁴ More specifically we might consider the cultural ideals embodied in Michelangelo's 'David', in Handel's 'Messiah', and at the more popular level 'Ein Feste Burg' and 'The Marseillaise'. It is largely because cultural ideals are embodied in art that

⁴ The latter, for example, involved a rather complicated juxtaposition in which a long-standing belief in England's destiny in the purposes of the world was read into the Bible in a way that confused England with Israel. Thus, in such oratorios as 'Israel in Egypt' and 'Samson' the typical Englishman could see the problems and destiny of his own country being enacted and embodied in a cultural ideal. 'Messiah', in this respect, is an untypical oratorio. Its continuing popularity has not ~been linked to this cultural ideal in quite the same way.

the latter provide such a very good barometer of outlook, condition and hopes of a cultural period in historical development.

- (vi) A work of art is neither a mere copy of extra-artistic reality nor a reality that can stand independent of its relationship to the wider reality of God and creation. A work of art imaginatively opens up the meaning of God's creation in either an obedient or a disobedient way. As such the work of art deepens and enriches our insight and our experience of God's world, but to appreciate this meaning it 'is necessary to experience the art work in a coherence with the rest of creation.'⁵

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of art, and the various issues that surround it, I would suggest the reader consult the following: *Shaping School Curriculum*, edited by G. J. Steensma and H. W. Van Brumelen, Terre Haute, Illinois: Signal, 1977, especially the chapters on esthetics, pp. 72-104; Hans R. Rookmaker, *Art Needs No Justification*, Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1978; and C. Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, op.cit.