On the Enjoyment of Art

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SEVERAL years ago, before I had knowledge of art or even any interest in it—though like most good Americans I professed to know what I liked and disliked, I went through a well-known art museum with a friend whom I knew to be a connoisseur of fine art. The experience was rather discomfiting to me. When my friend waxed ecstatic over pictures that seemed to me to be the ugliest and most unfaithful-to-nature, I remained silent, feeling that perhaps something was wrong with me. At last I came to a work I could enjoy, a picture of a man chopping down a tree in a woodland scene; I remarked to my friend that it was the most beautiful picture I had seen in the gallery. It was so accurate and true that I felt when I blurred my eyes a little I could walk right into the woodland and converse with the forester. It was the simple realistic art that I suspect most Americans would enjoy, but as might be expected my friend had quite a different opinion of the work. I believe he said it wasn’t even fit to be a calendar picture. Now I knew he was sincere and his ability to see beauty where I failed made me feel insensitive and clodlike in comparison, though I inwardly consoled myself in the smug thought that perhaps a majority of my countrymen would side with me in my opinions. Nevertheless, I wondered then, as again on many subsequent occasions, how a work can claim to be truly great art if it can be appreciated only by an initiated few.
IF GREAT art is indeed so limited in appeal, then how, I asked myself, am I to interpret Emerson when he says, “Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense...” In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty?” Or how can I believe my contemporaries who assure me that the great works of art are democratic, that it is their inherent universality which permits them to survive? For I ask how they can believe this when they know very well that the average American is entirely unaware of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D Major, that John Doe’s only acquaintance with Rembrandt came from the fifth grade schoolroom reproduction of The Night Watch, that the man of the streets considers it an abnormality to evince any interest in Aeschylus?

Fortunately I was not doomed to carry these questions unanswered to the grave with me. At least I have been able to answer them to my personal satisfaction. One night not so long ago I sat around the dinner table with a group of friends, discussing the books we had read during childhood. It seemed to us the most natural thing in the world that where scarcely ten years earlier we favored such books as “The Radio Boys at the North Pole” we now demanded that our literature be considerably more substantial and mature. We were gaining discrimination. This set up a whole train of thought in me. Why couldn’t it be the same in other arts as it was in literature? I remembered how I used to eagerly read all the Tom Swift books that I could get my hands on. I remembered particularly how my sixth grade English teacher told me I ought to stop reading such ‘trash,’ and how I felt that a grown-up world without “Don Sturdy Among the Gorillas” would be very sterile; in fact I thought it would be preferable not to grow up. But I saw that I did grow out of my old favorites, that I grew tired of them whether I wanted to or not, and most important of all I realized that progressively as my tastes developed my enjoyment of literature was heightened. While the situations with music and painting are not strictly analogous I could see that in literature as in the other arts I had undergone an evolution. My tastes had changed, almost without my knowing it. Where once I had loved The Ride of the Valkyries and Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody I now found in Beethoven the answer to my musical hunger.

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A ND I asked myself why? Why have my tastes changed? In answer I saw that when we are young we love action, the physical and the material. It is perfectly normal and desirable that we should. And as we grow older we become more and more concerned with the intellectual and spiritual, deriving from these things increased pleasure. This also is normal and desirable, although I am sure that my reader has thought of this before. Nevertheless it is an important point because, admitting its truth, it becomes desirable that we continue to grow in our appreciation of the creative arts, that we never become static at a certain level and refuse to go on. We see the danger in thinking that our present plane is perfection and all the rest delusion.

If we agree that we are speaking only of normal people in the Western civilization and their potentialities for enjoyment of the great works of art, if we accept it for a fact that our tastes in art can change, and that we have the potentiality for deeper appreciation, it would seem then that all of us might climb from our present ranks of the undeveloped into the higher ranks of the critical.

And what is to keep us from climbing into these higher ranks? What indeed but the lack of the will to grow! We passively hope to lead the more abundant life. Again and again we hear intimations of the joys that await us when we attain the Elysian pastures of the true appreciator of art, of the life-enhancing values we will receive. Is it democracy that so few of us ever arrive?

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Death

Victor Greimann

C. E. So.

Darkness
Has no length, no breadth;
It is not tangible
To touch or sight.
There is no dark—but absence of the light.

So it is with death—
Not a camel, kneeling at one's gate,
Nor Atropos' thread of darkest fate—
—but ceasing of the life.

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Sketch