

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Ethics of Literary Art.* by Maurice Thompson

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## BOOK REVIEWS.

**THE ETHICS OF LITERARY ART.** The Carew Lectures for 1893 (Hartford Theological Seminary). By Maurice Thompson. Hartford, Conn. : Hartford Seminary Press, 1893. Pp. 89.

“No careful reader,” says our author in his preface, “will need to be told that my aim has been at suggestion, and that I have not hesitated to sacrifice the graces of diction in order to say with fewest words what might have been turned to excellent account in the way of mere literature. . . . I have assumed that my suggestions are sufficiently connected to form the skeleton of a theory, critical and philosophical, which may be filled out and clothed by the student.”

The words “suggestion” and “suggestive,” as used in recent literature, whether by authors in characterizing their own work or by their kindly critics, have already begun to follow the fortunes that were long since followed by the word “essay.” Even modesty has its own responsibilities. The author in vain calls his work only an “essay” if he obviously means to offer us his most deliberate and skilful labors. And that is what writers of essays have often meant to do. We have long forgotten the first meaning of the word, and an essay might now as well be named a thesis, or a discourse, or a dissertation. Just so, a man may indeed declare that he means only to “suggest,” and many of us well remember having more than once felt a certain safety as we ourselves have written the word. But to “suggest” something after all must either mean in the end that we say something and are ready to stand by what we have said, or else the word cannot alone protect us from responsibility. There is no harm in the mere word, of course, and we shall all use it, no doubt, in the future; but “suggesting,” like any other sort of teaching, is as responsible an affair, in its way, as nailing theses on a church door; and Luther could hardly have bettered his position by saying, “In my remarks concerning indulgences, my aim has been at suggestion.”

One inquires, therefore, as to the theses that Mr. Thompson nails on the church door regarding the ethics of literary art. Some of them are substantially these: “We live life to enjoy it; we make and read literature to enjoy it. In either case enjoyment is not necessarily a light matter. It is a serious matter in the long

run. I do not regard ethics with a long face and a drooping lip. Right doing is not such a doleful thing that we need groan and look as if God-forsaken at the mention of it" (pp. 5 and 6). "I assume that human ethics is the perfection of selfishness,—but the selfishness of the perfect man who can see that the good of all mankind is his good" (p. 8). "The wholesome notion of right must be human, not personal" (p. 9). "It may seem to you that I am not saying much about ethics as a science. There is no such science. Do right" (p. 46). So much for ethics. As for art and the beautiful: "Beauty is of ethical importance, even mere beauty of raiment." All the good is therefore so bound up with the beautiful that, on the one hand, the evil cannot be beautiful, and the beautiful must be good. Both are essentially enjoyable. "The chief office of art is to teach through fascination" (p. 28). "Be honest, and answer that in every action pleasure is your goal. From the notion of heaven down to the wish for a tin whistle your aim is pleasure. You imagine that you would enjoy heaven; you feel sure that a tin whistle would delight you" (p. 29). Accordingly, the difference between good and bad art lies in the fact that the fascination of the latter is, immediately or in the end, corrupting, while the former fascinates and improves.

Consequently, nothing is good in art which so depicts evil as to make us prevalingly admire the evil. The test, meanwhile, of the goodness of art is furnished by what Mr. Thompson calls "immanent criticism," which (p. 62) "is what a civilization thinks of itself." To be sure (p. 63), this immanent criticism might go wrong, but, on the whole (p. 37), "a civilization generates immanent criticism to which that civilization's art ought to conform in order to be æsthetically and ethically adequate." This seems to imply that whatever the average civilized consciousness condemns as corrupting in art must be bad. Accordingly (p. 26), "the average mind is the triumphant criterion . . . what does not concern humanity as a body ought not to concern any man." And (p. 27) "the democracy of human economy always prevails."

Nevertheless, Mr. Thompson does not quite trust the average mind after all. "No genuine genius can be led by the nose; he likes a way of his own." "No very great book wears clothes of the extreme current style" (p. 78). Furthermore, as Mr. Thompson's indignant references to certain books show, a great deal of what he thinks bad literature does appeal to the vulgar taste, and even to masses of the cultivated, because this literature is fasci-

nating, although he believes it bad. Yes, on page 74 we learn that: "All along, as we plough our furrow of inquiry, we turn up this stubborn bulb of responsibility. To the average tongue it has an acrid taste, but we must bite it every day and every hour of our toil, whether we relish it or not." So it here appears that the average taste is in this case at fault, and that "responsibility," although it is often unenjoyable, is still ethically good, although, as we before learned, the good was always the joyous; and although we had no need to make an ill mouth when biting "every day and every hour of our toil" what, as we now learn, has an "acrid taste."

The inconsistencies thus "suggested" are but a hint of the enigmatical "suggestions" that fill Mr. Thompson's whimsical and exasperating book. Condemning ethical formulations as vain, he still undertakes to "suggest" his own ethical views, and, in a way, to preach. Attacking one of the most difficult of critical problems, viz., the place to be assigned in literature to those works of genius which are not free from morally corrupting elements, he treats this problem with the most superficial of abstract "suggestions," expounded with the airy manner of one who defies you to pin him down to any one positive doctrine. The problem itself, for the rest, is one that simply cannot be treated *in abstracto*. A book is like a man's character. Shall I be able to get any good out of an acquaintance with a man whose character is at all seriously tainted? The question admits of no general answer. I must be careful when I deal with such men; but, if I live, I shall come to know many such, and sometimes a great rascal may teach me a great lesson. Just so with books. The real question is always the individual one. Ought I, under these given circumstances, to let this book alone? That question a man of character will answer on the evidence, if the question concerns him. The answer may be, and happily usually is, easy enough. But it may assume any degree of difficulty. A wise man will not prefer bad books. He will not shun what just now he needs to use. Nor will he be content with bare abstract "suggestions." When the problem arises, he will meet it on its merits.

As to "immanent criticism" and the "average taste" and the rest, the "public" is precisely that vague whole to which one appeals as one chooses, either to confirm or to refute any view. The book that I hate is popular. Well, then, that is what I expected. The "vulgar" always run after the bad. The book that

I love is popular. Ah, then, I always knew that immanent criticism and the "average" man, in his health, would bear me out. Thus one can prove anything.

Mr. Thompson's intention to warn against corrupting literary art is admirable. His actual judgments are highly individual. His antipathies are whimsical. He has, in the present reviewer's opinion, made a serious mistake in giving his capriciously-worded lectures so definite a title. If a man thinks nothing of the "science of ethics," why need he publish a book on the "ethics" of anything? The word "Ethics" implies a formulated doctrine, and that again implies responsibility for one's "suggestions."

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CONSCIENCE: AN ESSAY TOWARDS A NEW ANALYSIS, DEDUCTION, AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONSCIENCE. By Rev. J. D. Robertson, M.A., D.Sc. Vol. I. *New Analysis of Conscience*. London: Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.

This is a painstaking but unfortunate book. The author gives us in Part I. a classification of the "activities of conscience." In Part II. A. we have a criticism of rival theories of their "formal constitution;" in Part II. B. an account of the "material constitution" (of which he means the content) "of the moral sense and the sense of duty." But he shows no evidence in any of these sections (which may roughly be said to fall under the heads of psychology, ethics, and sociology) of having taken the necessary care to prepare himself for a work of this kind. "Conscience" is a popular name which spreads loosely over a number of clearly distinguishable phenomena. In particular it is applied to the sense of pleasure or pain we experience in the perceived harmony or discord between the idea of an action (whether past, present, or future) of ourselves or others and our more or less consciously conceived ideal of the Good. One would have thought that some such general account of the popular use of the word was enough, and that the writer on psychology might then have been free to go on to show how these feelings issued in actions or tendencies to action, the writer on ethics to analyze the content of the Ideal on which the whole phenomena depends. This is not Mr. Robertson's idea. In Part I. he begins with a misleading coordination of conscience or moral sensibility with sensation or the sensibility to secondary qualities of perception, through which the primary