Some Notes on Art and Morality*

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N.B. under Art I include literature, the drama, music and the ballet, the cinema, and painting, sculpture, and architecture.

ABSOLUTE AND COMPARATIVE STANDARDS

May we consider some quotations together? "Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good." That is, give everything a test to sort out what is good and hang on to that. Our test is the Gospel, so this quotation hardly offers difficulty. Next, "Unto the pure, all things are pure." Does that mean that the pure see no evil in things? If so, "pure" would mean "innocent." Does it not rather mean that evil things do not harm the pure? Thirdly, "Love and do what you like." That sounds more dubious and yet, in a Christian context, since *caritas*, the gift of caring, is the prime gift that our Father has given us—after the gift of ourselves, which is essentially that of our free agency—then "Love and do what you like" makes sense; because if you love properly you will do what is right. Fourthly, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." As soon as we cite this, we feel immediately that

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*Adapted from a forum lecture given by the author at Brigham Young University, June 8, 1970.

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we are on doubtful ground. This is not the clarity of the Gospel, but the comparative humanism of the Renaissance. Hamlet was not a successful man. He has been successful in drawing our attention, but in little else. And has that not been the characteristic role of the artist increasingly since the Renaissance: to draw attention, but to be unsuccessful as a man and in religion?

RELIGION, MORALITY, AND ART

In this Church we can tackle the interrelation of art and morality more clearly and with more certainty than anyone outside can. Let me remind you of what I have said in my essay on Conversion about faith. Faith is a total act: it is a complete and willing surrender to our Lord Jesus Christ. It means that we lay all we have and all we have gained at his feet, and then in the light of his countenance we find we may take up again what we have laid down to use it for him. Religion is the fundamental thing. There is no successful morality without religion. Morality springs from religion. When moral standards become detached from religion, they are not maintained.

Through most of human history, art serves the religion of the artist, the religion of his community, the religion that the artist shares with his community. This is the characteristic historical situation. It is not the situation of our time. Art and morality both spring traditionally from a religious origin. Art therefore does not spring from, or fundamentally reflect, morality—it springs from religion. And since morality springs from religion, it is indirectly through religion that art and morality are associated. There can be no satisfactory bringing together of art and morality except in terms of religion, and that is why the world has been going increasingly astray in art and morality, and about the relationship between them, during the last three hundred years.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: CLASSICAL TIMES

I will adduce a few historical points to illustrate these generalities. There is a contrast in classical criticism between a treatise like Longinus's *On The Sublime*, and Horace's *The Art of Poetry*. Longinus seems to sense something profound

in art that illuminates its relation to religion. Horace—a bland and urbane fellow, who managed a fairly successful career, but always seems to infuse a touch of melancholy into his cynicism—felt he wasn't a particularly good man himself, but admired a good man, and wrote of art that it should mix the instructive with the agreeable: *omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.*[1] This line has been the source of much discussion ever since. But as we listen to the words and think of Horace, we cannot but feel that the remark is at much too low a temperature for us, and consequently the instructive and the agreeable do not fuse: they merely mix. Horace lived in a realm that had already abandoned its gods and was using them as a political and social convenience. He was in a position similar to that of post-Renaissance man.

THE MIDDLE AGES

The relationship between faith and art in the Middle Ages has been traditionally regarded as intense yet harmonious by aesthetes and religious *pasticheurs.* Yet there is dissonance. It is a dissonance that some people have admired as an artistic effect, but it is there. The greatest monuments of the Middle Ages are its cathedrals; nevertheless, at the same time as we admire those soaring arches, we find, at odd points of vantage, gargoyles; and carved under the seats of the choirs, grotesqueries. They express what the artist has not suppressed under the simplicistic aspiration of his navish faith: evil pushing out through the creases, corners, and splits. I can therefore never feel that any gothic cathedral, wonderful though it may be, is an example of perfect art; because it is not under control, or has not been sublimated: evil is breaking out all over the place.

Our Church can understand this. We are clearer-minded than those historians of fine art who have proclaimed the unity of faith and art in the Middle Ages. When we honestly face the artifact, the unity is not there. And even in the Medieval period, a period of so-called faith, we have double morality: celibates writing one kind of verse for the bishop, and another kind of verse for their own amusement. Their lives were not whole. How could they be? Celibacy is unnatural.

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[1]He gets everybody's vote who mixes the useful with the sweet.

THE RENAISSANCE

So we come to the Renaissance. From this time onwards there develops an extreme heresy about the artist. Imperfect though he may have been, unable though he may have been—even in the case of Raphael, and certainly not in the case of Michelangelo or Leonardo—to subsume into himself the whole of his epoch and a complete faith, nevertheless he had served a purpose. It did not occur to the artist in the Middle Ages or the Early Renaissance that he was expressing himself: at the lowest level, he was placing his technique at the disposal of his patron; and at the highest level, he was placing his technique at the disposal of his church, of his religion. He was doing it for his religion. This is true also of much of the greatest writing of the time, and it is most profoundly true of the music. Our music, like our drama, sprang from the bowels of the church and has a mainly religious origin; and it is greatest, as in painting, when it is faithful to that religious origin, however imperfect that may have been. The art of even an imperfect faith is better than the art of no faith at all.

But since the Renaissance, we have had this heresy—one of the major heresies of the modern world, which has misled so many people—this heresy of the artist as hero, of man as the center, which is the characteristic humanist heresy. As faith declined from the Renaissance onward, the division which was already there in the Middle Ages, and most definitely there in decadent Rome—the division between public and private morality—became greater and greater.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MORALITY

It would be an interesting exercise to compare the division between public and private morality within our own Church members and the division outside the Church. Outside, the split was condoned and then justified; our Church's authorities have never done either, and our members therefore know well when they do wrong.

This profound split between public and private morality which was manifest in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and handled there in a sophisticated fashion by the aristocracy; and covered up in the nineteenth century, when it became a desperate middle-class underground war causing a

great deal of individual unhappiness and agony—this split has now broken out generally and is spreading everywhere under the head of permissiveness. It is as if the gargoyles and the odd creatures under the choir seats had come down and out and were sitting in the pews. Characteristic of modern art it must be, since art reflects the community in which it lives, that it too becomes permissive; in fact, that it takes the lead in a desperate effort to attain through permissiveness a new salvation; and at the same time becomes difficult.

Permissiveness in society and difficulty in art are not one and the same thing, because, as I said earlier—and this applies to any state of society—art and morality are not directly linked. They are linked through a third and greater than they which is always there even in a corrupt society, and that is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. It may be obscured, it may be muffled down in the heart; but it is there in every man, although he may ignore it, deny it, suppress it, fight against it, and harden himself above it; but the light is still there.

SELF-EXPRESSION

Difficulty in art is a matter of technique; but technique reflects the major ideas of the time, just as morality reflects the major ideas of a time. And when a society has ceased to have a religious center, when it has at most an official morality which is slightly permissive and a private morality which is definitely permissive, then the artist is at a loss. And what does he turn to? That great heresy, the artist as hero; the artist as center; the artist with his right to self-expression.

What does a right to self-expression mean? The artist may go so far as to consider his right of self-expression so great that he does not sufficiently consider the need for communication; and lacking the common bond of religion between himself and his potential public, he really needs to consider communication more deliberately than the traditional artist needed to. Some artists may be so difficult that they fail to communicate even with themselves. Sometimes when I am writing verse, I have the sense, "what occurs to me to say is not communicating to me: I don't know what this is." Then I have to try and make out what it is that something in me is trying to do, and either to clarify it or reject it. Self-expression and communication must

go together in the artist. Some degree, at least, of coherence is required in the artist if he is to function in society at all. Thus, in the case of the morality, and in the case of the art, a center is lacking, a center which at the same time is outside and inside one. The external center (social and/or religious) is represented within us as well.

The artist has made himself the center of his universe for the apparent purpose of leading an unsatisfactory life. God is no longer the center; and therefore, in terms of Yeats' poem, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." It is not holding in the world at large.

EXPRESSION AND FAITH

After that brief and crude historical sketch—ending in the difference between the artist who serves a purpose which is not he and yet which is represented in him, and the artist who makes himself the center and finds moral and technical chaos as a result—I pass on to the attitude of our Church to art and to artists. Let us remind ourselves that the fundamental thing is religion; that art and morality are related to religion as secondary characteristics; and, furthermore, that the traditional function of the artist has been to serve a purpose and that the greatest art has served the purpose of a faith which the artist has shared with others. This sharing has provided the means of reconciling the artist's desire for self-expression, the kind of experience his public wants and needs, and his faith. If he is to be a successful artist, these three must harmonize. There have been exceptional times in the history of art during which, in some of the greatest individuals, these three factors seem to have come into harmony.

We now turn to our Church, which has had to work and struggle to establish itself, and which in but comparatively recent times has felt a larger urge to outwardgoingness and an interest in the arts as part of this.

EARLY CHURCH LITERARY ART

In the early days of the Church, there are examples of great literary art. There is the plainly convincing style Joseph Smith uses to describe his own experiences, a style quite different from the styles of his inspired translations and revelations. One

of our greatest treasures is the utterances of Brigham Young. His speeches have architectonic, and they must have moved his audiences by this totality of utterance. That is why it is a pity always to read him in extracts instead of in his full sweep. At the same time, his sweeping utterance is combined with details of realism, naturalism, and humour, which bring the matter home. I am reminded of some of the sermons of the early sixteenth century when, in Britain, these qualities of sweep and realistic appeal, in the first days of the Protestant Reformation, are to be found in such preachers as Latimer and Ridley.

EDUCATION IN THE ARTS

At this point, I come to the question that gets asked of me and of others in Utah and California—though not outside the USA (asking questions is often like digging up a plant to see if it is growing properly): "Why has the Church not produced other great artists in literature, and in painting and music?" The question may not be a correct one, but it is asked; and one of the things I must do is to say something about the answer. I should be presumptuous were I to say that I knew the answer. I don't know the full answer, because the question is profound; but I think I know some of the factors; and—arriving as I do from outside the USA, from a branch in a mission, from a place where we haven't yet time or occasion to think of these things at all—I have come to a place where we are beginning to think of them. And it is because I am from England South, which is a mission, and because I am a member of a branch of a mission, that I can say to you firmly as a start-off, here and now, I don't think you realize how far you've got in Utah, in BYU. The key word at this point is education, and you must forgive me if I try to get this across to you by saying something to you about my own education. I think I could bring it home to you best that way.

I was brought up during the First World War in a very small country cottage with about a hundred books in it. There was no public library there, no newspapers. I never saw a comic. I read most of those hundred books. I had nothing else to read. They were nearly all of them good ones. By the time I was ten and in London I had had it firmly inculcated into me that only vulgar children read the then-equivalent of comics; so it never occurred to me to read anything of that kind at all,

because by the time I was ten my basic taste had been formed. One of the things we need to bring home to ourselves is this: we must not think when we are bringing up our children that it will do to wait. It will never do to wait. That doesn't mean that we should get the children to try to experience things which are beyond their age (although most children are more aware of mature things than most parents realize). But what it does mean is that we need to try and give the best to our children from the beginning.

The outside world could not come in upon me in that little cottage in Essex: it wasn't there; I was in an artificial situation of restriction. Another example: my father and mother were both trained singers and they sang good things—they sang their children to sleep with them. I was put to the piano at the age of three, and I learned to read music before I could read a book (so much so, that I used later to sneak a book on to the piano when I had learned to read, play the music, and be reading a book at the same time—it was my way of getting through my practice). But when my father died, my mother had to find some means of earning extra money. In order to do that, she took to singing things which, perhaps, she would have preferred not to sing: such vulgarities as "The Bells of St. Mary's" or "Come To The Fair." At twelve or thirteen, I used to go and accompany her on the piano; and I used to have to play these things. At that age I already loathed them. I did not have to be told that they were vulgar; I could hear that they were.

DISCRIMINATION

The Church seems not to have applied the same restrictions in music as in the fine arts. This is true, I think, of the Puritan movement as a whole. When one has been brought up to discriminate in music, one can feel whether music is good or bad morally as well as technically. Let me air some opinions here that I do not want to discuss. I do not want even to say that they are right. They are convictions of mine upon which I should like you to reflect. Take Wagner. There is a sickly sexuality in *Tristan and Isolde*. There is a sickly religiosity in *Parsifal*. And there is a close relationship between the sickly religiosity of *Parsifal* and the sickly eroticism of *Tristan*. These productions of Wagner are quite different from his *Meister-*

singer; the Mastersingers, which celebrates a community in balance with itself, and which, when I hear its march, gives me some feeling in music of the strength and organization of our own Church: the group celebrating the power and glory with which it is inspired.

Now, Beethoven. Since I have grown up, I can never feel certain about anything in Beethoven—not quite certain. There is that streak of defiance. It is not despair; it is very often triumph, but even then there is a kind of grimness in it, a kind of determined self-assertion. It is there even in the last works, the last sonatas or quartets. They are wonderfully meditative, and then suddenly this kind of "I, Beethoven, am still here" is obtruded upon one. This can be felt most clearly when Beethoven is contrasted in his last works with the religious works of Bach, which are absorbed completely into worship. There is a passage in Herman Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel,* which has been translated into English under the title of *Magister Ludi,* about Bach's *Heiterkeit.* I cannot translate this word exactly into English, but it is, shall we say, a more even, controlled and elevated kind of cheerfulness. Bach, as we know, was a married man on no uncertain scale, a sort of Mormon before his time; and this combination of Bach's kind of cheerfulness and the fact that he was a polyphiloprogenitive family man is one of the sources of this music which flows on, develops, evolves, combines, spreads, goes up and down at the same time but always comes back again as he dances his worship before our Father. There is no individual self-assertion there at all.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

The difficulty about literature is that it is in words; not in paint, not in musical sound, but in words; and therefore it is in the medium in which we live and move and have our being. In consequence, literature gets mixed up with our lives in a way which we notice: we do not notice the effect of music and painting in the same conscious way. It is difficult for an artist in words to avoid the resentful feeling that the painter and the composer are usually criticized by people who know something about the medium and the general public accepts that. But when it comes to art in words, most people feel they have a right to an informed opinion of their own. This is where

education comes in—it may help us to be more diffident about our opinions. We can learn to like things we did not like before. I struggled for about twelve years to appreciate Dryden; but I liked him in the end and I am glad I made the effort.

CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC TASTE

At this point it may be appropriate to introduce a quotation, "to keep himself unspotted from the world," for I want to say something about contemporary public taste. Mormons nowadays have at least superficially to live far more in the world than they used to. Their once fastness is overflown by the airplane, and they live in Utah more or less as Mormons have to live elsewhere, cheek by jowl with non-Mormons. Apart though in some ways we still are, we get imperceptibly closer and closer to the world as time goes on. The greatest danger lies in accepting the world's values because we fail to notice that the world's values are creeping in and insiduously undermining our faith and our practise. The world of advertisement and its use of pornography, in all mass media, is one of the prime examples of this. I cannot now take even so-called quality British newspapers into my household without taking libidinous advertisements in with them.

Cosmetics are also important here, and dress. This does not apply so much to men as to women, although it is most unfortunately beginning to apply to men too. A grim quotation from Yeats illustrates the point: "Maybe the bridebed brings despair,/For each an imagined image brings/And finds a real image there." Where is the line to be drawn between on the one hand the desireability that a woman should make the most of herself; and on the other hand the urge induced in her by advertisement to substitute for herself some monstrous image that the mass media project—an image which is anti-art (fashion usually is anti-art).

There is a progression downhill from changing the colour of the cheek and lips to artificial eyelashes, wigs, and so on. Even men have padding in the shoulders of their suits to live up to some trapezoid ideal of maleness. There must be a point along this scale at which "art" ceases to be moral and becomes immoral. The attempt to present oneself to the world and possibly to one's future partner as a different person from what

one actually is—is that not a dangerously wicked piece of deceit?

How rarely nowadays is one able to see a girl in the prime of health with her own colour on her lips and cheeks and her own natural hair uninterfered with. Compare the "sweet disorder" with what you see when a woman comes from the hairdresser crowned with that appalling mechanical tidiness, an exactness which makes one feel that her head has been covered with a plastic shell. It is the same with dress. No doubt the Garden of Eden was the ideal thing; but we have ever since had to face the fact that we clothe ourselves; and the verdict of history is simple and straight-forward. It is the verdict of the whole of the East, the whole of classical times, of the whole Middle Ages, and of the whole of the nineteenth century practically up to the First World War, that there is only one aesthetically satisfactory place at which a woman's costume can be terminated so as not to interfere with the beauty of her form, and that is just above the foot and nowhere else. I am talking both aesthetically and morally now; for since these ideas spring from religion, there is a relationship between them.

INATTENTION

A major point about our time is that of the cultivation of inattention, which is a kind of hypnosis or drug addiction. People who keep the T.V. and the radio on the whole time are doing themselves and their children and their neighbors a disservice, because they are encouraging inattention. Something that is there the whole time is background and no longer draws proper attention; it dulls, it becomes a kind of drug, it floats you sluggishly along. It is like a stream of dirty, lukewarm water, a kind of inferior bath taken disgustingly in common. We are given our free agency in order to *choose,* and one of the things of which we need to remind ourselves is that choice is implicit in the whole of our lives and at every moment of our lives. This means that we should not submit ourselves to mechanical agencies which prevent us from exercising choice and which encourage our inattention; because of all the things that are required in art, the cultivation of delicate and sensitive attention is the most important.

ART IN THE CHURCH

Art in the Church must depend on the relationship between the members of the Church and the artist with his technique and his desire for self-expression. That relationship can be encouraged into harmony by education in the Church. We are in a difficult position in the Church because we are out of touch with the modern world, and we are in a magnificent position in the Church for exactly the same reason. We have a message to the world. That message springs from our faith. In order to give that message, we need to select from the world the instruments which will help us to convey our faith; and at the same time, we need to study the world to understand with what we have to deal. But we need to study the world, not from the point of view of the world, because that is wrong; but from the point of view of the center which we have in the Church and in ourselves that enables us to judge clearly and firmly. One of the major tasks of our education surely is to apply the Church's standards to the great artistic works of all time in order that we may judge them in their approaches to the relationship of God and man.

The Holy Spirit does not do everything for us. It is there to guide us when we are unable to do what is needed for ourselves. It is up to us in our Church to educate ourselves to the point at which we can experience the best of art, and to begin with our children. With our young children it begins. They are affected from the beginning by what is on and heard within the walls of the home. Their environment creates their taste. There is room for optimism: Shakespeare succeeded in producing the greatest nonscriptural literary art of all time, and also in being popular. He did not achieve this immediately. In his early poems, he was writing something exclusive for a coterie—the young men around the Earl of Southampton. Then he produces in his comedies brilliant things which people like. We find that he may give them depreciatory titles: "As You Like It," "What You Will." These titles indicate "This is your sort of taste." Still, though *As You Like It* may be a botch, *Twelfth Night* is both finely made and popular. And from *Julius Caesar* onward to the end of his life, Shakespeare produced his greatest work, and this work was in tune with his time. He was universally appreciated. He was regarded as the greatest dramatist of them all by even such a man as Ben Jonson. He

received acclaim in his lifetime. That is something for us to remember; because it is of profound importance. The greatest literary artist of all time had a certain amount of struggle, yet he achieved a balance with his audience. But then, he could hardly have succeeded at another time. Had he been born twenty years earlier, he would have had another task before him, that of educating taste; and he might not have been so great a dramatist. His precursors prepared the way for him. Great artists come when the time has arrived for them to come; and in the meantime let us do all that we can to educate ourselves so that we can say, "We needs must know the highest when we see it."

If the artist lives the life of the Church, the right kind of art will be forthcoming. Art in the Church is a bridge to the world, a bridge to help us convert as we produce in art the testimonies of our spirit so the outside world will come to recognize us as being the one true source of Christian faith. Eliot once spoke of the life of the saint—and in our Church we are all saints—as "a lifetime burning in every moment." That is what we may come, after development, to experience in the Celestial Kingdom. Does anybody seriously believe that in the Celestial Kingdom there will be light music in cafés, or light reading in bed, or *kitsch* pictures like those on chocolate boxes? If we are struggling towards the Celestial Kingdom, must we not try to experience and find the best of all time all the time? Not just a good time. The world of café music and light reading and the chocolate box is not the vision of *Revelations.*