

A NOTE ON THE SUBSTANCE OF ART

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Mr. Boyesen's article in this issue implies a philosophic principle concerning art which is too frequently ignored in discussions of the subject, but which—when accepted as true—should reconcile the apparently opposing views of "Art for art's sake" and "Art for life's sake." The principle implied is that the substance of art is spiritual, that it is, in fact, nothing less than the affections of the mind.

It is traditional to divide works of art into two aspects for critical consideration: substance and form. Usually, however, that which is taken for the substance of a work is not so at all, but is only part of the vehicle by which the substance is re-created in the recipient's mind (*i.e.*, by which the work arouses an affection). Thus the substance of the "Mona Lisa" is not the lady with her famous and enigmatic smile; that is the *subject*. The substance of *Hamlet* is not the agonized effort of a heartsick young prince to avenge his father's murder, though this may inadequately sum up the play's *content*. The substance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is not the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, though this is the music's mighty *theme*.

Subject, content, theme—these are not the substance of art. What, then, is the substance of these works? Or to bring it home to Mr. Boyesen's examples, what is the common stuff that unites Michelangelo's "Creation," Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and the "Eroica" of Beethoven? Obviously they have varying contents or subjects—the biblical creation of man, the degeneration of one fictional man in the kingdom of Scotland, and a noble commentary on the potential greatness of Napoleon self-betrayed.

That which makes them all art, instead of history or philosophy or anatomy lessons, is *affection*. Affection is the substance of art, as it is of the spiritual world. And this is true whether considered from the viewpoint of the creative artist or of the responsive recipient. The imagination which kindles new forms out of the storehouse of sense impressions is itself stirred to do so by an affection; and the art form thus created is a form of affection. And without an equivalent affectional response in the mind of the

recipient, the work lies lifeless on canvas or stage or hangs unfulfilled in the air of the concert hall.

To see this is to see the real strength and purpose of art, and to separate this purpose from extraneous concepts and responses that confuse and weaken its place in the mind's activities. Such extraneous views include, for example, hanging a portrait because it resembles a loved friend, or a landscape which looks like home. They embrace the field of "program" music, in which the story of William Tell (or the Lone Ranger) supplants the intrinsic response that the music might bring. (I shall forever resent the conductor of my childhood who taught me words to the leading theme of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony, and thus deprives me of a mature enjoyment of its beauty.) And the extrinsic approach to a work of literature is that which delights in a moral subject regardless of the work's power to evoke an affectional response to the subject—a very evident confusing of subject and substance, and a mistaking of the function of art.

May I add that I am happy to see discussions of this field of human activity in the pages of the *NEW PHILOSOPHY*. If the substance of art is the affectional half of the mind, then the nature and methods of art are eminently worthy of attention in a journal dedicated to a philosophic investigation and understanding of the Divine creation and of man's reciprocal culture.