

History and Art

From Plato to Tolstoy, art has been indicted for disturbing morality. According to Plato, poetry provokes the negative emotions of man. Tolstoy defines poetry as an infectious thing and the degree of this infectiousness depends on the ability of artist. But Tolstoy ignores the form of art. The experience of beauty and thinking is different from moral arts. The meanings of passion is transformed. Wordsworth defines poetry as recalling feelings in peaceful state. But the calmness we feel is not about that recalling. Poets arouse emotions of present and give them a new and stronger direction. Shakespeare never talk about aesthetics, except in dramatic art. At a Shakespeare play, we penetrate into the nature ~~if he had a theory~~ His theory is complete agreement with fine arts.

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From Plato to Tolstoy art has been accused of exciting our emotions and thus of disturbing the order and harmony of our moral life." Poetical imagination, according to Plato, waters our experience of lust and anger, of desire and pain, and makes them grow when they ought to starve with drought. "Tolstoy sees in art a source of infection. "not only in infection," he says, "a sign of art, but the degree of infectiousness is also the sole measure of excellence in art." But the flaw in this theory is obvious. Tolstoy suppresses a fundamental moment of art, the moment of form. The aesthetic experience – the experience of contemplation – is a different state of mind from the coolness of our theoretical and the sobriety of our moral judgment. It is filled with the liveliest energies of passion, but passion itself is here transformed both in its nature and in its meaning. Wordsworth defines poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility". But the tranquility we feel in great poetry is not that of recollection. The emotions aroused by the poet do not belong to a remote past. They are "here" – alive and immediate. We are aware of their full strength, but this strength tends in a new direction. It is rather seen than immediately felt. Our passions are no longer dark and impenetrable powers; they become, as it were, transparent. Shakespeare never gives us an aesthetic theory. He does not speculate about the nature of art. Yet in the only passage in which he speaks of the character and functions of dramatic art the whole stress is laid upon this point. "The purpose of playing," as Hamlet explains, "both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure." But the image of the passion is not the passion itself. The poet who represents a passion does not infect us with this passion. At a Shakespeare play we are not infected with the ambition of Macbeth, with the cruelty of Richard III or with the jealousy of Othello. We are not at the mercy of these emotions; we look through them; we seem to penetrate into their very nature and essence. In this respect Shakespeare's theory of dramatic art, if he had such a theory, is in complete agreement with the conception of the fine arts of the great painters and sculptors.